



Stranger Love by **Ladey Jezzabella**

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-02 19:12:01

Updated: 2019-10-14 04:42:38

Packaged: 2019-12-12 14:22:25

Rating: T

Chapters: 25

Words: 59,519

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Anya Hammond knows there is more to her father's death than what they tell her. She also knows that Billy Hargrove is no good for her. It's a shame the bad ones are always so darn good. Billy Hargrove/OC

1. Chapter 1

Stranger Love

Chapter One:

"It's day 136. A year and a half since you've been gone. Not much has happened really, It's like we always said, 'nothing ever happens in Hawkins'. Life has just gone on without you which I hated at first. I hated seeing anyone smile, remember when I screamed that at you a while back? I was in so much pain and people were smiling and laughing as if you had never existed, as if they didn't care. Of course I know now that it's just life. Life must go on.

So I still don't really know what happened to Barb. It's all very mysterious. I do think it's all connected though; Will Byers disappearing, you...and then Barb. I can't prove anything though, how could I? I wish I had answers. I really want to know why.

School is starting again tomorrow, I managed to fix up my car so it actually works now. Oh, and we got some new neighbours who moved in last week, still haven't really met them properly. I believe there is a young girl and a boy around my age, but that is all I know. Mom said she will bring them a welcome casserole so I guess she will drag me along for that.

Mom has still been drinking, a lot. She says it helps her cope. I need to tell her to stop but I am afraid, afraid she will do something more stupid and I will be left with no parents at all. The diner is fine, I work there after school every night and Charles is looking after it brilliantly. Don't think I could have kept it going without him. Wez still comes in every Friday for his coffee and pancakes, sometimes I think he has forgotten you are no longer there and he relives the pain all over again.

How is it on the other side? I hope you are having fun."

The young girl placed a single white snow drop against the head stone, the damp grass penetrating her light faded jeans. She had been sitting beside her father's grave for nearly an hour, like she did every

week on Sunday.

Just over a year had passed since Jim Hopper, the chief of Hawkins Police, had knocked on their front door in the late evening. Removing his hat solemnly, the tall man had given them the most horrific news they had ever heard in their lives.

Benny Hammond had been shot at point blank range... for the money in the til.

Well. That was the 'official' story.

Everyone knew Benny's. It was a local diner, in a small town where everybody knew everyone. Hawkins never had any break-ins, robberies, or murders. Not like in the city. So, when Anya Hammond had heard the story, she'd hadn't believed a word.

She still didn't.

Her father's death had been a great loss to the community, but even more of a loss to Anya. She loved her father, more than anything in the world. He had been kind, generous, loving and loyal. Her parents had been completely in love with each other since meeting in High School and were married at 19, Anya following swiftly. Her grandparents on her father side visited every three months since her birth, but her Mom's parents wouldn't. They never liked Benny, nor the fact he 'corrupted' their perfect daughter, who was supposed to marry a rich socialite and work in an office in the big city somewhere.

Patricia Hammond, her Mom, was beautiful. She had curly long locks of black ebony hair and pale, flawless skin. Her eyes were rounded, inset and framed with long lashes. Anya was practically a double of her mother, only looked younger. The similarities between the mother and daughter were so striking that people often thought they were sisters.

The past year, however, had not been kind on her Mom. Patricia seemed to have aged twenty years since her father had died; her hair greying, eyes wrinkling at the corners and a permanent frown on her full lips.

Anya had been the one looking after her Mom, looking after the house and the business as well. She would be damned if that diner closed, she owed that much to her Dad.

Standing up, Anya glanced down one more time at her father's name etched forever in stone. "I will see you next week Dad," She said, before scanning the graveyard to find Bracken.

The large German Shepard cross was bounding around the place, tail wagging happily. "Bracken, come on girl! Time to go," The dog's ears pricked up and she trotted over to Anya, who began walking back home through the fields.

Bracken was a four-year-old bitch that her Dad had found begging at the back door of the diner. She had only been 8 weeks old and looked half starved. After a lot of begging on Anya's part, her parents had allowed her to keep the mottled brown mutt. She and Bracken went pretty much everywhere together, hell she'd even take her to school if it wasn't against the rules!

Anya lit up a cigarette as she walked, feeling relaxed instantly as she took long, heavy drags. Her Mom didn't like smoking so Anya had to make do with smoking when she could. Knowing it was a bad habit, she planned to quit one day, but that day just wasn't today.

She stubbed out the offending item before entering through the back door, music pumping from the living room. Tina Turner's 'What's love got to do with it' that had been number one in the charts for most of the month was playing whilst her Mom's singing was just about audible.

"I'm home Mom!" Anya cried, hearing the music's volume decrease slightly.

"Hey honey!" Patricia exclaimed happily, stumbling into the kitchen with a glass of whiskey in her hand. "Nice walk?"

"It was Ok. Some of the trees looked like they have a disease though, they might have to cut them down before it spreads any more I reckon," Anya watched as her mother fussed Bracken for a while. "Anything to eat?"

"Charles is bringing some after he closes up the diner later,"

"Cool, is he going to be staying again?"

Patricia took a big gulp of the amber liquid in her glass. "Probably. I know you think I am being reckless but he has done a lot for us this past year,"

"I doubt you need to sleep with him as a thank you Mom. Plus, I think he is really starting to like you which won't end well and you know it," Anya bustled around the kitchen to get Bracken's food. Her Mom had been seeing Charles for the past couple of months. Anya knew it was because her mother was lonely, and Charles was infatuated with her. He probably wanted more, a relationship, but Patricia was not going to play ball on that one.

Her Mom had cried for six months after Benny died and then proceeded to make a mess of her life. She had disappeared for weeks on end, and Charles had been the one to bring her home every time. Now she had calmed down somewhat, only tending to drink rather more than one probably should.

"I do like him sweet, just maybe not as much as he likes me. It can't be helped," Patricia just shrugged, alarmingly nonchalant about potentially breaking a man's heart into pieces. Then again, her Mom had gotten rather good at numbing her emotions, and so had Anya.

Bracken began munching at her food as the soon to be 18 year old turned to face her Mom. "Just don't drive him away. We need him,"

"Of course I won't!" Patricia suddenly let out a squeak. "We have to drop the casserole I made to the new neighbours!"

Anya rolled her eyes. "Can't we just eat it? I'm starving and I really don't see the need to bring food to people, it's not like they won't have any,"

"Anya Hammond, you know full well it is customary amongst Hawkins to bring food round to a new family! Moving into a new home is stressful, they will be grateful for the show of kindness,"

"You sound like a commercial Mom." Anya deadpanned, pulling her

coat back on. "Let's get it over with then,"

They approached the front door of the house adjacent to theirs. Big back yards, a forest as a back drop and large space for houses was why most people lived in Hawkins. It was a bit of a 'in the middle of nowhere' sort of place, but her Dad had been born and bred there. There was nowhere else she would have wanted to grow up.

Anya frowned, hearing loud angry shouting coming from inside. "Maybe this isn't such a good time?"

Her Mom, however, still hazy from her drinking, knocked on the door firmly. The shouting behind it ceased, and they were greeted by a tall man with a dark moustache. He looked at them like they were the last thing he wanted to deal with. "Yes?"

"Hi there! My name is Patricia Hammond, and this is my daughter, Anya. We live next door," Patricia gestured towards their establishment.

"Right. Well this is not a very good time right now-"

"Oh, I only stopped by to say a neighbourly hello and give you this," Her Mom thrust the casserole at the flummoxed man. "It's a Hawkins tradition!"

"Neil, who is it?" Came a soft woman's voice, before she came into full view. She was small, with red hair and big brown doe eyes. "Oh, hello there,"

"These are our new neighbours," Neil told the woman, who was presumably his wife. "This is my wife Susan,"

"Susan! It is good to meet you. I was just telling your husband about our tradition here in Hawkins, can't have new neighbours without greeting them with a home cooked casserole!" Whether it was obvious to this family that her mother had been drinking, Anya did not know. Patricia was very good at functioning even with litres of alcohol in her system.

"Well don't leave them on the doorstep Neil, come in," Susan said, earning a sharp look from Neil. She dutifully ignored his glare, taking

the casserole from Patricia as they stepped inside. "Thank you, this looks lovely,"

Anya took in the house. There were still boxes in the hallway and various bits and bobs lying around. The place looked clean, though. The last person to live in this house was Mira, an old lady who had passed away in her sleep. She'd been the doting mother to five cats who had been rehomed, though Patricia had at one stage been keen to take them on. Mira also had two sons who she hadn't seen in over twenty years. Neither of them attended her funeral.

"So where have you folks moved from?" Patricia asked.

"California," Neil responded. "Needed a new start. Billy! Maxine! Come and greet our neighbours!" He barked up the stairs, his voice echoing through the house. A disgruntled looking young girl ambled her way to the bottom of the stairs, her hair the same beautiful shade of red as Susan's. "This is Susan's girl, Maxine, and my boy is Billy...BILLY! Get yourself down here NOW!"

"Alright!" A masculine cry came from above.

"My son is one of these kids who believes everything will just fall to him on a plate, so you will have to excuse his attitude," The way Neil said those words made Anya frown slightly. There was clearly some very deep routed issues, even if she had only been in the house two seconds.

Her mind went completely blank, however, when said Billy came tumbling down the stairs.

He was like one of the boys she'd seen in the movies; thick, gorgeous dark blond hair falling just to the nape of his neck. Very blue eyes framed with long black lashes, a silver earring hanging from his right ear. He wore tight fitted denim jeans with a navy blue shirt, the buttons opened to reveal a chiselled, Californian tanned chest.

Billy was beautiful.

Anya fought to keep herself under control. She smoothed a hand through her dark, feathered hair, wishing she'd put some make-up on.

The boots she was wearing were at least three years old, completely worn and tattered from continuous use, and her oversized coat hung off her small frame, making her look like a child who'd borrowed her Dad's clothes.

Billy's blue eyes met Anya's equally blue orbs and she prayed her cheeks wouldn't flush. He had a smirk on his lips, flashing the two Hammond women a dazzlingly white smile.

"Billy, these are our neighbours, Patricia and her daughter Anya. Use your manners and say hello," Neil instructed. For a split second, Anya saw Billy's smirk falter, before it returned.

"Hello," He drawled, eyes fixed on Anya.

"Billy is starting Hawkins high tomorrow, what grade are you in Anya?" Susan chimed, obviously trying to break the tension.

"Oh, I'm starting twelfth," Anya answered, tearing her eyes away from Billy, who had begun raking his gaze over her entire body. She felt like she was being x-rayed, as if he had powers that could see right beneath her clothes.

"Billy, you hear that? At least you will know someone at school now," Susan half smiled.

Billy's grin only got wider. "Yeah Susan, how great is that?" His voice was laced with sarcasm, sounding like liquid honey. Anya doubted this boy had any feeling of nervousness, even if he was starting in a brand-new school where he knew no one.

"Maybe you can teach my son some manners while you are at it," Neil voiced, glaring harder at his son than ever before. Billy's jaw clenched, one of his thick dark eyebrows twitching.

"Is your husband working?" Susan asked innocently. Anya saw her mother tense up and decided to jump in quickly.

"No, my Dad was murdered last year."

Patricia elbowed her daughter sharply, but Anya just stared straight ahead, not a believer in beating around the bush.

The silence was deafening. Anya hated pity, and the way Susan was looking at her screamed pity. "I am so sorry, my condolences,"

Anya just wanted out of there. From the pitying looks she was receiving to the now hard stare from that gorgeous excuse for a boy, she took hold of her mother's arm. "It's OK. We better be going, some of us need beauty sleep before tomorrow,"

Susan gave a hard-faux laugh. "A beautiful girl like you? I don't think so,"

"It's the lighting," Anya began pulling her Mom to the front door. Patricia was going into shut down mode, and she needed to get her home before she began having a meltdown.

"Thank you so much for the casserole!" Susan continued to jabber at them as they exited the house, Anya still feeling those blue eyes on her before the door was swung shut. They got back inside quickly, Bracken's tail wagging furiously as her owner's returned.

"Mom, you can't shut down like that every time Dad is mentioned! They don't know us, what did you think they wouldn't ask any questions?"

Patricia looked at her daughter with glazed eyes. "Why did you have to be so blunt about it Anya?"

"Because it's the truth! I didn't want you to spin one of your lies again, saying he is a soldier at war or something! It's unfair!" Anya watched as her Mom pulled her long hair up into a loose bun, before pouring herself another glass of whiskey.

"I don't like it! At least when I tell my stories there is a chance your daddy will come back to us," Patricia let a tear fall down her cheek as she whispered. "I just want him back with us."

Anya pulled her Mom into a hug. "I know. I want him back too."

2. Chapter 2

Stranger Love

Chapter Two: Ride with me Princess

Hawkins High school was abuzz of activity that Monday morning. Everyone had many tales to tell of their summers, where they had visited, the best parties they had been too. Anya pulled into the parking lot slowly, aware many of the kids barely paid attention to where they were walking. Too busy chatting, she had to honk her horn to get a couple of freshman to get out of her way.

She stepped out, clad in dark denim jeans, her sunglasses perched on her nose as the sunlight filtered through a haze of cloud. She scanned the lot and spied Gemma just hopping out of her sparkling white car.

"Hey hey!" She exclaimed as Anya bounded over, the girls greeting each other with extreme pizzazz. Gemma had spent the summer with her Dad in Washington, where he lived with his new girlfriend.

Gemma had beautiful dark skin, the colour of rich dark chocolate. Her hair was a mass of tight ringlets ending just under her ears, and she had bleached some of the strands to turn them a honey gold. She took her large sunglasses from her deep brown eyes.

"How was Washington?" Anya asked as she looped her arm into Gemma's, the pair making their way over the lot.

"It was great apart from my Dad's new hussy. I had to remind myself she is part of the family now otherwise I may have murder-" Gemma stopped immediately, wincing at her own choice of words as she looked with wide eyes at Anya. "Gee Anya I am sorry!"

Anya tutted. "It's OK Gemma, I think I can handle it now. I'm not a fragile doll that will break at the mention of death. So how did you want to murder her exactly?"

Gemma laughed, looking relieved. "I wanted to wrap my hands around her throat and throttle her! Her voice Anya, honestly, she

sounds like she has a nasal problem!"

"Cripes. How old is she again?"

"Not much older than us. My Dad's midlife crisis turned into a midlife baby," Gemma's eyes were suddenly trained on a car revving its way into the lot. The engine cut off, and out stepped Billy Hargrove, cigarette in hand.

Anya couldn't help but stare for a moment. He was so ridiculously attractive and she wasn't the only female in the lot to have noticed this either.

"Holy moly..." Gemma breathed. "Who is that hotness over there?"

"That's Billy Hargrove. And his sister Maxine, they live next door to me now,"

"You what!?" Gemma hissed. "Hold on, you have an unbelievably hot new neighbour and I only find out about it now?"

Anya sighed, part of her wishing she could run up to Billy and kiss him fiercely; the other telling her that no way in hell she should be even thinking about kissing him! She had to stay away from that boy, he was trouble all over. Unfortunately, Billy didn't seem to realise this.

"Hey new neighbour," He smirked, sauntering up to her with his cigarette between his lips.

"Hi Billy," She said politely, trying to keep her voice from trembling. Her heart was racing within her chest and she clenched her books tightly.

"Say, how about later you give me a tour of the school?" Billy asked, his voice dangerously low as he invaded her personal space. "You could er, show me where all the secret places are, you know?" He ran his tongue across his straight teeth, running his eyes over her body.

Anya could smell him. A mixture of smoke and spices, his cologne so strong it nearly knocked her over. She was very aware of what he was alluding to, and also very aware of how strongly her body was

reacting to him. She pouted at his words, his eyes finding her lips instantly. Taking a step back, Anya straightened up and cleared her throat. "I wouldn't know of any... 'secret' places. I don't play that way,"

Billy chuckled. "It's cuz you ain't played with me baby,"

"Yeah? Well I ain't that easy, baby," She mocked, side stepping him and walking through the front doors, Gemma rapidly in tow. Anya could feel his eyes on her back as she went.

"He's totally into you Anya," Gemma said as they reached their lockers. "I could tell,"

Anya just grimaced. "I don't care. There is no way I am getting involved with a guy like him,"

"Purlease. You don't have to get involved! Just get naked. There are only a few times in life when you can be reckless, and being a teenager is one of those times! Believe me, when you are thirty, married and have four kids you will look back on this moment and think 'I really should have fucked Billy Hargrove behind the school bleachers that day',"

Anya outright laughed, closing her locker after she had retrieved the right books for her classes. "Gemma, you have definitely given that way too much thought,"

Gemma sauntered up close to her, mimicking Billy's movements. "But Baby, I want to go to those secret places with you, and sex you so good I ruin you for anyone else," She said in a low voice, slapping her hand on the locker doors above Anya's head.

Anya grinned. "Oh yeah? You think you're so good huh? What if I'm the one who rocks your world?" She tilted her head, flicking her hair over her shoulder dramatically. The pair burst into manic fits of giggles, Anya feeling tears spring into her eyes.

"Girls! The bell rang two minutes ago! Get to class right now!" Exclaimed a flustered Mrs Barter, who was hustling down the corridor in black chunky heels. Her hair was unkempt and frizzy, a

pair of glasses perched on her wrinkled face.

Home Room that morning was filled with excited girls, who were all in a tizzy over Billy Hargrove. Of course, Gemma had spilled the beans about him being Anya's neighbour, so she was currently inundated with questions.

Eventually Anya got so sick of the frenzied females she told them all in no uncertain terms to shut the hell up and leave her alone. They all sulked with her for the remainder of the day, much to Anya's delight.

The gorgeous bad boy was in three of her classes, but he mostly lounged around at the back of the classroom, occasionally drawling out sarcastic comments that made the boys laugh and the girls swoon. Anya stared determinedly forwards, anxious to never meet his beautifully blue eyes. She was also very determined to do well this year and get herself into college.

There was a school in New York she was dying to go to - Manhattan University of Dance and Arts. Anya thrived on creativity. She loved to sing, dance, write. Her dream of writing lyrics and music for the stars was going to become a reality, she just had to make sure she didn't mess up her final year.

She hadn't even been to New York, nor to visit the college. The pictures and reviews had convinced her entirely, and she didn't even care anyway. Getting out of Hawkins was what she needed to put all the trauma of her Dad's death behind her. Plus, he had been the one who had been utterly committed to getting her into the school.

"You can't stay here in Hawkins running this diner with the talent you have young lady! This place will always be here. You need to get out and see more of the world!" Benny had always told her. "Reach for the stars kid!"

Anya mentally shook herself. She couldn't think about her father, it would only upset her and she didn't fancy crying with an audience. For a very long time the entire student body had tiptoed around her, as if she was a leper. They were afraid to upset her, afraid of what to say, how to act. Anya felt relieved when people began acting

normally again, instead of acting like she had a bomb in her bag.

Gemma was the one friend out of many who just treated her like a normal human being. She been there when Anya hadn't been able to get out of bed. She'd hugged her when she cried so hard she thought she might break, and even dragged her out of the house when she knew it was time to get back out there. Others, like Nancy, had avoided her like the plague. It was amazing how tragedy revealed who people truly were inside.

"Hey Mr Jarvis," Anya said as she entered the music room.

"Oh hey there Anya, how was your summer?" He asked, shoving the last of a few papers into his briefcase messily. Mr Jarvis was an older man of around fifty. He had salt and pepper hair, with a tall, broad figure. Once a star football player, now the brown eyed man was a school music teacher who'd been at Hawkins High for the best part of ten years.

The classroom was empty, save for one pupil in the corner listening to music on a Walkman. "It was good, mainly consisted of work,"

"Have you still been practicing?"

"Yeah, though it's hard to get any peace and quiet with Mom blasting her music every day," Anya set herself behind the piano, a book of sheet music already set out for her. "What is this then?"

"I thought you could learn Franz Liszt, 'Love Dream',"

Anya raised her full eyebrows. "You think I am good enough?"

"I know you are," Mr Jarvis was one of the main reasons Anya had managed to survive after her Dad's murder. He'd ensured she always got to her music lessons after school and taught her how to express her pain through music. Without it, she often thought she would have had a mental breakdown.

It was after about an hour and a half that Anya began making her way across the lot once more. Her day was far from over; she now needed to head over to the diner to do a four-hour shift. She almost had a heart attack, however, when she spied Billy Hargrove, leaning

against his car with smoke billowing from his mouth.

He spotted her instantly and a smirk formed on his lips. "Well hello Princess, changed your mind then?"

Anya rolled her eyes, making to walk past him but blocked by his huge mass of a body. "Come on baby, you don't know what you're missing out on. Let me take you for a ride,"

"As tempting as that sounds, I'm gonna pass," Anya voiced, looking up at him firmly.

"What the hell are you even doing here so late?"

"I had a music class. Not that it's any of your business,"

"Music class? What kind of shit is that?" Billy flicked his cigarette to the floor, using one of his heavy black boots to stub it out.

"It's a class...with music, you know what music is, right?" She said to him slowly, as if talking to a seven-year-old. "And anyway, I could ask you the same question,"

"I got detention," He grinned.

"Detention? It's the first day!"

"So? That's just how I roll,"

Anya was beginning to feel heady. It was his cologne, smelling as strong as it had done that morning. She didn't know if she detested it or loved it, but either way, she knew she needed to get away from him quickly. "That's a fascinating story and all, but I must go," She again sidestepped around him and headed for her car.

Billy followed her. "Why? Have you got important music lessons to attend to?" He chuckled, clearly amusing himself far too easily.

"No. I have work. I have a feeling you don't know what that is, either,"

"You know, all this work has got you real tense, I can help you relax

Princess. I have very good stamina," His voice was low and seductive, like the roll of thunder in the middle of a storm. She started to feel irritation brimming, wondering how many times she could shut him down before he pissed off.

"Billy, let's just say it doesn't matter how good your stamina is, because I doubt you could keep up with me." She flashed him a cheeky smile, loving the surprised look that flashed over his features. Using his momentarily stunned state, Anya slid into her car and revved up the engine, leaving a bewildered Billy Hargrove standing alone in the car park.

3. Chapter 3

Stranger Love

Chapter Three: The Strangest Thing

Anya got home from working in Benny's around ten thirty, the air turning slightly cooler as the night had already drawn in. Charles often worked with her until close, unless he decided to take a night off. In any case, the man had been a godsend. He always made sure Anya wasn't overworking, either, but she usually ignored his advice.

Her eyes were drooping as she rounded the corner, glad she was nearly home as all she wanted to do was face plant her bed.

She pulled up to the driveway and her headlights caught the figure of a girl sitting on the small stone wall between the two properties.

Realising it was Maxine, Anya jumped from her car and trotted over to young girl. "Maxine? Are you OK?"

The young redheaded girl just shrugged, a rather forlorn expression on her face. "I'm good. And it's just Max,"

"Ah, right then, Max," Anya was just about to ask her why she was sat outside so late, when loud bellowing filtered from the house next door. She could hear Billy's father roaring like a bear, occasionally the quieter, feminine voice of Susan breaking through two male voices. "They do that a lot?"

Max nodded. "It's usually because of Billy. He's such an asshole."

"He's your stepbrother, right?" Anya asked, planting herself next to the girl.

"Yeah. My Mom met Neil in California and we've been a happy family ever since," Max's voice was laced with sarcasm, her tone sounding too worn out to be one of a child's. Anya wondered how long this sort of thing had been going on for. She knew the damage it could do to a kid to live with parents who were at odds.

"Do you want a doughnut?" Anya voiced, holding out a paper bag full of the sugary treats. Max eagerly grabbed one, sinking her teeth into the soft dough immediately.

"Thanks," She said with her mouth full.

"No worries. There are from my Dad's diner, secret family recipe," Anya tapped the side of her nose.

Max finished off her doughnut in record time, reaching into the bag for another one. "Your Dad was shot, wasn't he? I heard some kids talking about it today at school,"

Anya winced slightly, though hid it from Max, who had started munching her second doughnut and seemed unperturbed by her rather insensitive question. "Yeah...he was. At the diner. Apparently, some people came in to rob the place, my Dad was working late, so they put a bullet in him and took the \$40 that was in the til."

"That sucks." Max sighed, licking her fingers one by one. "Didn't think things like that happened in small towns,"

"Me neither," Anya agreed. "It was a bit of shock,"

"Do you miss him?"

"Everyday."

The shouting increased in volume, and suddenly Billy burst through the front door, stomping over the porch. He looked furious as he shrugged his black leather jacket on, his bare chest almost gleaming in the moonlight. Anya felt her heart racing, glad it was dark enough so no one could see her blushing.

His eyes found both Anya and Max. "What the fuck are you looking at?" He spat. "Get back inside Max!"

"Alright, you asshole!" Maxine retorted, equally as angry. She stood up, the bag of doughnuts still in her hands. She turned to give them back to Anya.

"No, keep them," Anya muttered. "See you around Max,"

"Bye Anya," The redhead answered mutedly, the door swinging shut with a snap behind her.

Having already had two encounters with Billy that day, Anya did not want a third. She also knew he was unpredictable and very angry. She made her way back to her own house, intent on leaving the situation behind. Billy, it seemed, was not so keen to do so.

"Why were you talking to Max?" He barked from behind her.

Turning around, she watched as Billy got closer to her. "She seemed upset so... I wanted to check on her,"

Billy looked at her dangerously, his eyes blazing. "What goes on in my house is none of your god damn business, do you understand?"

"She was upset Billy, what was I supposed to do?"

"Leave it alone! Don't use Max to butt your nose into my life!"

Anya stared at him, mouth slightly agape. "I wasn't! Believe it or not, the world doesn't revolve around you! Goodnight Billy!" She marched up the wooden porch steps purposefully, feeling her own fury boiling in her blood. That boy was a real piece of work!

He didn't say anything else, and she heard the roar of his engine. Anya watched as the blue Camaro skidded down the road and out of sight.

...

Anya couldn't remember having a birthday she had not looked forward to – until her eighteenth approached.

Born on September 21st, 1966, Anya Louisa Hammond came into the world with a mass of dark ebony hair and a cry that could have woken up the whole of Indiana.

Well, that was what her Dad had told her, anyway.

Both her Mom and Dad were nineteen when she was born, a mere year away from the age she was going to be in two days. She couldn't

imagine becoming a mother so young. It was such a responsibility, and she wanted to do a lot with her life before she even thought about having children.

Things were always complicated for her parents. Since her Mom's parents had cut her off, money had been very tight. That's when her Dad had decided to open Benny's, which soon became a staple within Hawkins.

The problem was that her Dad had always made a huge event out of her birthdays. They would always eat a massive breakfast, she would always be 'sick' that day so couldn't go to school. He would close the diner and they would take a day long road trip to wherever they wanted. Anya could do anything, eat anything and most importantly, spend quality time with her parents.

For her seventeenth, they had gone on a hike around the mountains with Bracken. Patricia had stayed behind to relax in the log cabin they had hired for the day, so she and her father had trekked for hours. When they returned, they had a barbeque and ate until they were so full they could barely move. It was one of the most perfect days imaginable.

So, facing a birthday without Benny seemed unfeasible. The pain of not having her father there became so unbearable Anya had to stop herself from thinking about it.

"You are having a party,"

Anya looked up from her book, meeting her Mom's eyes at the kitchen table. "What?"

"For your birthday. Have a party," Patricia poured herself some orange juice. She was wearing her uniform, taking a day shift at the diner. She had recently began working there again, taking a long time to build up the courage to go to the scene of her father's death. "I already spoke to Gemma, and she said she will make invitations,"

"Mom, shouldn't this be the other way around? I convince you to let me throw a party?"

"Well you won't, will you? Come on, it's your eighteenth! If you aren't partying and getting drunk then what's the point?" Her Mom grinned widely. "I will even get out of your hair and go to the diner for the evening,"

Anya was flummoxed. She honestly believed her Mom to be insane. "I mean...I love a good party, but are you sure? The house might get trashed,"

"It's nothing a good clean up won't fix. We can shove any breakables upstairs and to be honest, this house could use a good teenage party, it feels left out,"

With a laugh, Anya caved. "Fine. If you insist,"

"Yay! So, tell Gemma to sort out the invites and leave the rest to me, I will have this house party proof in no time!"

Anya watched as her mother floated away, muttering something about needing a stereo player for music. She shook her head, wondering who the parent really was in the house.

Gemma was slightly overexcited when Anya revealed the party plan. She squealed, jumping up and down for about five minutes before finally calming down. A gust of wind picked up the girl's hair, and they both headed to the front doors of school to get inside, away from the cold.

Anya suddenly spotted a brown-haired boy standing by himself by the wall, his skin deathly pale and a horrified look on his face. It was Will Byers, the young boy who had gone missing in the woods and caused a frenzy in the normally quiet town of Hawkins. It was around that time when Barb had vanished and her father was murdered.

"Will? Will sweetie, are you alright?" Anya asked the boy softly, approaching him with caution. His brown eyes were widened, as if he were petrified. Will seemed to be looking upwards, towards the sky. It was the strangest thing. "Will?" She touched his shoulder.

The boy jumped so high he nearly reached the sky, gasping in shock. Anya also gasped, his reaction frightening her to death. "What's the

matter?" She asked him worriedly.

"Did you not see it?!" He cried. "The shadow?"

"What? What shadow?"

"Will!" Came a voice to the right. Anya whirled around to see Mike, who was Nancy's younger brother, skidding around the corner quickly. "Will are you OK?"

"I think he is ill, he feels very cold," Anya said as she felt Will's forehead.

"No, no he's fine, honestly," Mike said confidently. "Aren't you Will?"

"Yeah...fine," The young, very shaken looking Will whispered.

Anya was not convinced. "He needs to go to the nurse,"

Mike seemed slightly frantic. "Yeah! Yeah good, I will take him, you have helped enough!"

"But Mike-"

"Honestly, we will be fine! Thanks!" Mike proceeded to drag the slightly dazed looking Will into the school, vanishing from Anya's sight. She was completely bewildered and slightly confused.

"What the hell was that about?" Gemma inquired, having hung back to watch the scene unfold.

"I have no idea. But whatever it was, it's not good."

4. Chapter 4

Stranger Love

Chapter Four: The Alien Creature

Anya left Benny's late again, the country lanes almost black with darkness at 11:15pm.

She was tired, and going slightly faster than normal, in a hurry to get home. Working so much was taking its toll, what with school pressures as well. She knew Charles would be fine if she stopped doing so many shifts at the diner, but Anya didn't want to. If she was idle, her brain would start replaying the night her Dad was killed, and she couldn't face it.

The kid, Will Byers, was also playing on her mind. His strange episode at school had riddled her with questions, not to mention curiosity. Whatever had happened to him when he went missing was clearly still affecting him.

Suddenly her headlights caught the figure of a four-legged creature in the middle of the road. Anya cried out in shock, swerving to avoid the strange looking animal. Her front tires veered off the road and she lost control, the bonnet of her car smashing head on into a tree.

The airbags deployed and Anya felt herself being propelled forwards harshly, before hitting the back of her seat again. She must have blacked out for a while, for her eyes fluttered open and she read the blurry time on her radio: 12:36pm.

The road was silent, save for the hissing of her engine. Anya groaned, putting her hand to her forehead and feeling hot sticky blood on her fingers. She used her hand to feel for the door latch, opening it up and practically tumbling from the car. A sickly feeling had settled in her stomach, the world spinning horribly on its axis. Anya heaved herself to a standing position, unable to see much save for the streak of light emitting from one of her headlights.

In her hazy state, she barely heard the strange growling sound at

first. Her eyes squinted into the darkness of the forest, wondering if the animal she had almost hit was hanging around. She couldn't quite place what it was...a fox, maybe? It had been quite big, but dark in colour.

A high-pitched squeal made her gasp in fright. A shadow flitted through the light. There was something out there.

Anya was about to get back into the car when she saw it. It wasn't any animal she'd ever seen before in her life. It was black, almost slimy looking, with a strange elongated face. Huge claws dug into the hard forest floor as it seemed to just stare at her.

She couldn't move for fear. The creature let out a low, glutural growl before its mouth opened up in four parts, revealing many rows of ultra-sharp teeth. Anya screamed, scrambling to get into her car when the sound of a loud engine filled the night.

The creature scurried into the forest out of sight, as the car skidded to a halt next to Anya's now totalled vehicle. Billy Hargrove stepped out of his car, cigarette in his mouth as he looked at her. "This is why women shouldn't drive,"

Anya wanted to come back with a sassy retort, but her head was pounding and she felt extremely weak. Plus, her heart still hadn't stopped racing, the strange looking animal still freshly in her mind. "There was...something in the road...I swerved and lost control..."

"Fucking obviously. Don't you know you should just run whatever it is down and keep going?" He strode over to her, leaning through the driver's window and flicking the engine off with the keys.

"I don't need a goddamn lecture right now!" Anya spat angrily. She had not been expecting sympathy from the world's largest prat but a little wouldn't have gone amiss. Her outburst sent waves of nausea through her body and she started to keel over, a faint feeling overwhelming her.

"Whoa there," Billy mumbled, catching her before she hit the ground. "Does Hawkins have a hospital or what?"

"Yea, it's West just outside town. I'd rather go home though," Anya leant her hands onto his strong, muscled chest, which was partially bare due to his buttoned-down shirt. She liked the feeling of his skin; he was warm, solid, and smelt lovely. She was also surprised at his willingness to take her to hospital in the middle of the night.

"Look, you're bleeding and might be concussed. It's a fucking pain in my neck but if you die at home your Mom is gonna blame me," Billy started walking them to his car.

"You didn't crash my car," She pointed out, sliding into the passenger seat. Billy quickly hopped into the driver's side, starting the engine.

"Just do me a favour and try not to piss me off. I know it's difficult for you," He sped off into the night. Anya leant her head back and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to curl up into bed and go to sleep. Billy's hand was suddenly tapping her face and she opened her eyes in annoyance. "You need to stay awake!"

Anya groaned. "But I want to sleep,"

"You just crashed your car and hit your head. If you go to sleep you might not fucking wake up," Billy cupped her chin in his hand, looking at her sharply. " ." He let her go and rested his hand on the wheel.

"Alright! Since when did you become a doctor?"

"It's basic stuff you idiot,"

"Mom is going to kill me...my car is wrecked..." Anya knew she should just be grateful she was in one piece, but her Mom really would kill her. And what the hell was that thing she had seen in the forest? "There was a really weird animal in the forest."

Billy's expression would have been comical, if not for the situation. She continued regardless, her head still whirling. "It looked like an alien. It had loads of teeth and I swear it was going to attack me,"

"Shit. You definitely hit your head." He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

"I am serious, it was like nothing I have ever seen before,"

"Anya, you crashed your car, hit your head and started seeing things. You did not see a freakin' alien creature,"

She huffed. "I know what I saw."

The drive to the hospital was quiet after that. Anya staggered from the blue vehicle, thinking she would have to struggle up to the doors by herself, when Billy wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. Again, she was surprised. She thought he would drop her here and drive off into the night.

"Oh lordy, what happened here?" The receptionist asked in concern.

"She crashed her car," Billy said evenly, though looked extremely impatient.

"You guys been drinking?"

"No, we haven't been fucking drinking. She needs a doctor, are you going to get one or do I have to tear around this hospital to find one?" His tone was dangerous and commanding. The receptionist, with her perfectly back combed blond curls and long red nails, looked at him in fright and offense.

"There is no need for language. Take a seat and someone will be out shortly," She said through gritted teeth.

"Stupid bitch." Billy muttered as he led Anya to the waiting room, which was empty. The walls were gleaming white and looked freshly painted, but the floor still didn't seem to want to stay still for her. Sitting down, Anya put her head between her knees with a groan.

"What were you doing out so late anyway?" Billy asked after a few minutes of silence. Anya sat herself up slowly, meeting his gaze.

"I was working at the diner."

"You do that every night?"

"Yes,"

Billy pulled a face. "Why?"

"Because it was my Dad's and because I want to," Anya did not feel comfortable talking about her father with anyone, especially Billy Hargrove. It was too painful.

"Last year was quite the drama in little old hick Hawkins, wasn't it? Sounds like it was more interesting than it is now," Billy smirked a little, running a hand through his curly hair. Anya glared at him, trying to resist slapping the smile from his face.

"It wasn't interesting. My Dad died, people went missing, a kid vanished to god knows where and went through god knows what! I shouldn't be surprised though, a heartless bastard like you would find it entertaining." Anya shot her hands to her temples, wishing they would at least give her some painkillers in that goddamn place.

"Yeah well, shit happens, you know? Don't have to get all whiny about it. There was a murder every week in California,"

"If you could just shut up, Billy, I would appreciate it," Anya growled, blinking away tears as she turned away from him. She hated him and his arrogant attitude. How could he be a decent human one minute and have a complete lack of empathy the next?

"I don't have to be here you know, I could drive away right now and leave you stranded here," He said.

"Fucking go then!" Anya hissed as she found his sky-blue eyes once more. She couldn't stop a couple of thick tears falling down her cheeks. She swore a flash of what looked like guilt appeared on his face, his hand moving as if he wanted to reach out to her...

"Hi there, oh, hello Anya...are you ok?" Doctor Himes, who had been working at Hawkins Hospital since the year dot, faltered as he saw how upset Anya was. He had been treating her since she was a baby, and had been just as distraught when her father died.

"Yeah, fine. Well, sort of. I totalled my car,"

"Ah geeze Anya, follow me and I will sort you out. Does your boyfriend want to come with us or...?" Doctor Himes looked around

Anya at Billy.

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend, not now and not ever." Anya said very quickly, missing the slight wince that flashed over Billy's face. "We are neighbours, he found me on the road,"

"Oh right, well thank you for doing that young man. Let's go through then Anya," Doctor Himes nodded at Billy, who was watching Anya intently as they left.

About an hour later, Anya trudged back into the waiting room and was surprised to see Billy still there. He was sprawled out over a few seats, snoring softly in his slumber. Anya couldn't get over how peaceful he looked asleep. The usual frown on his face had disappeared, and he looked like a kid for once.

Doctor Himes had stitched, cleaned and patched the wound on her forehead with a bandage. Random bruises had started to pop up all over her body and she had a burn mark where the seatbelt had cut into her neck. Other than that, she had no other injuries, so she was lucky all round.

The painkillers Anya had taken were beginning to kick in, and she felt quite woozy. Doctor Himes had given her a prescription to pick up more tomorrow, and advised her to rest up for at least two days.

Anya cleared her throat. Billy did not move. She sighed, pacing over to the sleeping boy and shaking his shoulder.

Billy just muttered 'five more minutes' and continued to sleep. Anya gave him a slap on the chest. "Billy! Wake up!"

Finally, his eyes opened, and he looked around groggily. Anya had never seen him so unkempt and uncontrolled, finding it very endearing indeed. He was so handsome, his hair slightly ruffled now, making her wish she had been the one to mess it up with her fingers.

"You finally done?" He asked, his usual composure returning like the switch of a light. "Thought I would be here all night,"

Anya ignored him, swiftly becoming exhausted. Doctor Himes had advised her to stay awake for a few more hours, just to be safe, but

she didn't know how long that was going to last for.

They got home relatively quickly, Billy parking up in front of the houses. Anya went to get out of his car when his voice stopped her.

"I'm sorry. About your Dad. I don't mince words or anything but that must have really sucked," Billy wouldn't look at her directly, almost as if being sincere was too much for him.

"Thank you. And for tonight, too. You pretty much saved my ass,"

"What, from the alien?" Billy said, Anya shocked to see what looked like a genuine smile tugging at his lips.

"Yes, from the alien," She replied, a small grin finding her mouth too.

"You know you owe me now, right?"

"Yeah, well, if you ever get attacked by that creature I saw, I will be sure to save you," Anya slid out of the car just as the front door of her house burst open. Patricia came running down the steps, wrapped up in her blue linen dressing gown.

"Anya! Where have you been?" She asked hysterically as Anya spotted Chief Hopper coming down the steps after her mother. She hadn't even noticed the police car sitting on her drive! "Are you ok? When you didn't get home I thought the worst! What happened to you face? Where is your car?"

"Mom, calm down! I had a bit of an accident but I'm fine," Anya said as she was embraced by her mother. "Billy took me to the hospital,"

"So, we're all good here?" Hopper, looking tired and disgruntled, asked in his deep voice.

"Yeah, fine," Anya nodded.

"Well goodnight then," He retreated to his car.

"Why didn't you call me from the hospital?" Patricia said as the police car roared to life and took off down the road.

"Because I thought you would be asleep,"

"Well, never mind, the main thing is that you are ok. Thank you for helping my daughter Billy,"

Billy had lit up a cigarette by now. He nodded, catching Anya's eyes. The pair held each other's gazes for a moment, before her Mom cut the moment and the tension between them quickly.

"Well goodnight Billy," Patricia said as she bustled Anya into the house, who turned back to look at him before her Mom shut the door with a snap.

...

5. Chapter 5

Stranger Love

Chapter Five: Carpool

Anya had not seen Billy Hargrove since her accident. She spent the next two days recovering in bed, whilst watching the TV her Mom had wheeled into the room. Her car had been written off, so she was now vehicle-less and rather pissed off about it.

Patricia had gone outside to pick up the newspaper and seemed to be taking her time about it. Anya had insisted she go back to school, becoming increasingly bored sitting around the house when she felt perfectly fine. She'd had a bit of whiplash and a terrible headache for a while but the painkillers sorted that out for her.

"Anya, sweetie, I have just been talking to Susan outside. She's agreed that Billy can give you a ride to school and back, until you get a new car,"

Anya stopped mid chew of her cereal, staring wide eyed at her Mom, who looked extremely happy with herself. "Are you serious?"

Her Mom sat opposite it her at the breakfast table. "Yes, why not? He lives next door, you go to the same school, what's the harm?"

"Jesus Mom! I would rather walk!" Anya had suddenly lost her appetite. The last thing she wanted was to be in such close proximity with that boy, the other night had been bad enough. "Have you seen how he drives?"

Patricia raised an eyebrow. "Who was the one who totalled their car the other night?"

Anya opened her mouth to make a retort but she found herself speechless. God damn it! Her Mom always knew how to put her in her place. "I don't like it." Anya merely grumbled, angrily pushing her cereal around her bowl.

"Well I don't care. I have enough to do without having to ferry you

back and forth, so suck it up." Her Mom flashed her an evil grin, enjoying the torture of her one and only daughter.

Gathering her school things together, Anya retreated down the steps of her porch. Billy was already leaning against his car, a rather disgruntled expression on his handsome face. He caught sight of her straight away and blew a cloud of smoke in her direction.

"I give you one ride to the hospital and now you think I drive a cab?" He drawled, chucking his cigarette to the floor and stomping on it with a heavy black boot.

"It wasn't my idea!" Anya said, wanting to make that fact very clear.

"Yeah, well I am not gonna be hanging around for you, you got that?"

Anya rolled her eyes as Max came hurtling down Hargrove's driveway. "Yeah yeah, I got it."

Miserable wasn't the word. Anya let Max clamber into the back before sliding next to Billy, his body heat radiating off him like a space heater. Her heart felt like it was trying to escape her chest cavity. She pictured him skidding to a halt in some deserted part of the road, Anya straddling him and then doing extremely bad things in the front seat of the Camaro.

She mentally shook herself. Why could she not stop imagining his large hands sliding up her bare thighs? His mouth kissing her neck and biting down on her bottom lip...?

Billy turned up Kiss on his stereo, tapping his hands on the wheel in time with the music. Anya enjoyed rock music, in fact, she enjoyed many forms of music. Deciding she needed to focus on something other than the hotness besides her, she reached out and grabbed a few of his cassettes that were scattered at her feet.

There were a few bands she'd heard on the radio recently, then she came across The Doors. She opened the cassette to read the tracks.

"You like the Doors?" Billy asked her as he watched.

"Yes, they are my favourite, apart from Fleetwood Mac,"

"Jesus. You're lucky you like The Doors or I would have to kick you out of my car,"

"What's wrong with Fleetwood Mac?" Anya said, affronted by his attitude.

"What's wrong with Fleetwood – firstly, it's music for chicks, and secondly, it sucks,"

"Music for chicks? I didn't realise music was gender specific,"

Billy turned up the stereo even more. "You hear that!?" He roared over the din. "That is music! Not some girlie rock crap where they moan about shit,"

"Billy will you turn that down already!?" Max screamed from the back, her expression reading she would rather be anywhere else than sat in the car with the pair of them. Anya could feel the speakers vibrating next to her and wondered how long it would take before they blew.

Finally, Billy turned it down, a smirk on his lips. "I rest my case,"

"Stevie Nicks is awesome, your case is not rested," Anya pointed out. "Fleetwood Mac have won awards and everything,"

"How can you compare Stevie Nicks to someone like Bruce Kulick or Ted Nugent?" Billy ranted. Anya liked how passionate he had become. Like he cared about the music, rather than treating it nonchalantly like he usually did. Billy, for once, seemed genuinely interested in the conversation they were having.

"Exactly! You can't compare them, they are all equally as talented as the other,"

"That's the most stupid thing I've ever heard," Billy shook his head. "Next, you'll be telling me Cyndi Lauper is as good as Jim Morrison,"

"What have you got against women in music?"

"It's not all women, just the ones who suck,"

"Name me one famous woman you like in music then," Anya said.
"And it doesn't count if you think they are hot,"

"Fine." He drummed his fingers over the steering wheel for a moment.
"Oh! I know, Wendy Melvoin,"

"The guitarist who plays with Prince?"

"The very one. And she's pretty hot too," He wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Ok, I'll give you that one. You got lucky Hargrove,"

Billy smirked at her, tongue between his straight white teeth. "I always get lucky,"

"Ew." Max groaned from behind. "Are we almost there?"

Anya bit back a grin, placing the tapes back into the foot-well as they span into the school parking lot. She quickly realised that the entire student body was about to watch her exit Billy Hargrove's car. The thought alone caused her stomach to drop to her knees. She was going to be the top gossip in school that day for sure.

Deciding to hold her head high and not let the stares ruin her day, Anya jumped from the blue Camaro swiftly. She had already received a few daggers from Tina and her cronies, who by now were focused solely on Billy and Anya. She closed the door behind her just as Gemma raced over.

"Anya!" She cried, practically rugby tackling her and nearly sending them both the floor.

"Christ Gemma I've only been gone two days!"

"I missed you!" The curly haired girl cooed. "You nearly died!"

"It really wasn't that dramatic," Anya said, meeting Billy's eyes for second. He nodded at her, the first time she'd ever seen a shred of respect for her in his demeanour.

"You are carpooling with Mr Hotness now?" Gemma asked as she

watched Billy walk into school, the lust heavy in her eyes. "Tell me you are going to do it with him in his car?"

Anya wrinkled her nose, despite feeling slightly hot under the collar just thinking about it. "Ew! No, and I am good by the way, you know, considering my car was totalled,"

"You just said it wasn't that dramatic, so I focused on the interesting matter of you and Hargrove. Fate has brought you two together,"

"Fate can go and fu-"

"So, are you seeing Billy now then?" A voice asked from behind both Anya and Gemma. They whirled around to face Tina, a curly haired brunette who was also a senior. She was pretty, with very long slender legs and a thick layer of gloss on her pouty lips. Her two friends stood beside her, all looking Anya up and down with sneers.

"What? Me and Billy? No, definitely not,"

"Then why is he giving you a ride to school?" Tina's tone screamed jealously. Anya felt slightly sorry for her. If she had hopes of Billy becoming anything more than a fuck buddy, she was sorely mistaken. He didn't strike Anya as the boyfriend type and Tina always wanted couple status.

"My car got wrecked and we are neighbours, you do the math," Anya replied.

Tina folded her arms, sticking out one of her hips as she snapped her pink gum. "Well good, because he is mine, do you understand that Hammond?"

"You are welcome to him honey," Anya drawled, wondering how long Tina and the clones were going to stand there staring her down.

"Cool. I'm glad we understand each other." The brunette strutted past both Gemma and Anya, who both rolled their eyes at each other.

Gemma tutted, linking her arm with Anya's as they walked over the grass to the school entrance. "She's got about as much chance with Billy as I have with Eric Stoltz."

"You'd have a chance with him! Anyway, I am sick of talking about Billy Hargrove. What's new with you?"

"Mom found out my Dad is marrying a woman 23 years younger than him. She's completely enraged." Gemma said with a chuckle.

"I thought your Mom was happy with Kent?" Anya asked. Kent was Gemma's step Dad of nearly ten years now. He was a seriously nice guy, and had been good friends with Anya's Dad.

"Oh, she is. She's just livid he's found himself a younger hussy. I reckon she's a gold digger for sure," Gemma opened up her locker, situated next to Anya's, the interior decorated with pink glitter and photos of the two of them.

"That's gonna be one awkward wedding,"

"Oh, hon, you are coming with me. There is no way I am facing that alone,"

Anya patted her comfortingly on the back. "You know I'll be there."

"Shit!" Gemma suddenly exclaimed. "Your party!"

"Oh damn, I totally forgot about that," Anya leant on the cool metal for a moment, watching as her fellow peers meandered their way up and down the hall. She caught sight of Nancy and Steve, who were engaged in a very steamy kiss and quickly averted her eyes.

"Invites, we need to make them today. It's Thursday so we have all day today and tomorrow to get the word out," Gemma rambled. "I can get Steve and the guys to get us some beer kegs and I have a tonne of cups at home from my last party,"

Anya nodded absentmindedly, her eyes trailing down the corridor. She met with a pair of familiar blue eyes, watching her from down the hallway. Billy Hargrove leant casually against a row of lockers, his arms folded across his broad chest. She gazed back him, startled, pulse beating harshly through her entire body. He had an intense, brooding look on his face, the kind that rendered her utterly useless. She swore her knees were turning to jelly, a blush creeping over her pale skin.

"-do you know if your Mom will be staying at her boyfriends? I mean Patricia is a really cool Mom and all, but it's always good to get parents out of the house. Anya? Hello? You listening to me?" Gemma's voice filtered through the fog that had settled around her mind. Anya snapped her head away from Billy, feeling the back of her neck growing hot.

"Yeah sure I am listening. Erm...what did you say again?"

Gemma closed her locker door as the bell rang. "I will tell you at recess. Oh, and tell me again how you aren't attracted to Hargrove?"

Anya blushed openly, hoping Gemma had missed the hot stare between the pair of them. She ignored her friend's giggles as she retreated to class with her head bowed in shame.

6. Chapter 6

Stranger Love

Chapter Six: Birthday Princess

Gemma bowled into Anya's house at 6:30pm, laden with a box of spirits and what looked like a thousand red plastic cups. "Right! Has your Mom gone?"

Anya laughed as she watched her friend depositing things onto the dining room table. "Yeah, she went to stay at Charles' around an hour ago. Where did you get all that booze from?"

Gemma tapped a slender finger on the side of her nose. "Let's just say I know a guy! So, Steve and Johnny are bringing the beer kegs later, Harry is going to be on car key collection and I think Amy said she is bringing some strobe lights,"

"I swear you should go into party planning when you leave school," Anya said, taking the cup that Gemma had filled up for her with vodka and coke.

"Drink up birthday girl!"

The pair of them bustled around for the next hour readying the place for the onslaught of crazy teenagers. They then rushed upstairs to get ready. Her bedroom became a flurry of powders bursting into the air, perfume flooding their nostrils and hairspray, lots and lots of hairspray.

Anya sported a short black jumpsuit which showed off her long, slim legs. It had a rounded neckline and buttoned down at the front, with a gold belt wrapped around her waist. She matched it with a simple gold necklace, matching bracelet and stud earrings. Gemma had helped her back comb her long dark hair to give it more volume, curling the ends slightly. She had a lick of blue eyeshadow painted on her top lids and a light brush of mascara to frame her blue eyes.

Gemma looked incredible in a tight red dress, her curves accentuated

perfectly. She let her hair do it's natural thing, curling wildly to her shoulders. She painted her full lips a dark rouge, using mascara to also give her eyes some definition.

Anya had decided against heels and slipped on a pair of black pumps, whereas Gemma had huge matching red platforms on her dainty feet. It was probably going to be around midnight when the girl threw her heels off due to blisters.

"Oh! Before I forget, Happy Birthday Anya!" Gemma announced, pulling out a neatly wrapped present from her bag. Anya sat on her bed and took the square package from her.

"It's not my birthday until tomorrow!"

"Never mind, I really want you to open it!" Gemma sat next to her excitedly. Anya grinned, ripping open the bright pink wrapping paper eagerly. Inside, there was a flowery bound album, with the name Anya Hammond scrolled onto it with silver pen.

"Did you make this?" Anya asked, feeling the album's smooth texture beneath her hands.

"Yes, have a look inside,"

Upon opening, Anya was greeted with photo after photo of her and Gemma. Pictures of them in her paddling pool when they were nine, one of them at the mall, the first time they'd been allowed to go on their own... "This is...perfect, absolutely perfect,"

"I hoped you'd like it. It's a scrapbook of our lives, so when you go off to New York for college you won't forget me," Gemma said, her voice braking ever so slightly.

"I'd never forget you Gemma, but this is beautiful...thank you so much!" Anya gushed, throwing her arms around her best friend and squeezing tightly. She couldn't even face thinking about life without Gemma.

"Oh wait...there should be a photo here," Gemma suddenly said, breaking the hug and pointing at a gap in the one of the pages. "It was one of you last year, you know when we went to the carnival?"

You were wearing that white jumper?"

"Yeah I remember. It might have fallen out," Anya had a scan of her bedroom, now covered in clothes and make-up. "I'm sure it will turn up,"

...

By the time 8pm came around, the house was full. Anya wandered through the house after being given what she thought was her 20th drink, already feeling slightly tipsy. It had been around this time last year when Freddie held a party and Anya had spent the first hour drinking, and then the rest of the night with her head down the toilet. It was not a mistake she was going to make again.

Placing her cup down on the side, she did not protest as Gemma dragged her up to dance. Duran Duran blasted through the stereo speakers, the wave of teenagers moving up and down to the beat of the tune.

"Hey Gemma, there is a kid outside who won't drop his car keys," Said a lad who was probably in the year below she and Gemma. He had been dragged to the party solely to keep tabs on who was coming in, thanks to Gemma, who took party planning very seriously.

"Tell them if they don't drop the keys they aren't coming in!" Gemma barked, obviously losing her patience.

"I already did, they won't listen,"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Do I have to do everything? I'll be back in a minute Anya," Her disgruntled best friend marched off towards the front door. Anya laughed, joining Steve, Nancy and Johnny who were bopping away to the music. She really would miss Gemma when they went off to college.

"Great party!" Johnny shouted at her over the din.

"Thanks!"

"Oh, Happy Birthday for tomorrow by the way, in case I forget later!" He cried, flashing her a grin. Johnny was very good looking in a boy

next door kind of way. He had light brown, almost blond floppy hair, big hazel eyes and was at least six foot tall. They'd been friends, like most of the kids in Hawkins, since childhood, though hadn't spoken much until senior year started. He leaned closer to her now, his mouth near her ear. "You look really great, like, really beautiful,"

Anya smiled up at him shyly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You don't look so bad yourself,"

Johnny had the kind of look in his eyes a boy usually got when smitten with a girl. Said girl happened to be Anya, who had gone a little pink under his attention. Unfortunately, it just wasn't quite up to par with the way a certain bad boy made her feel. She cursed herself, wanting nothing more than to get the cigarette smoking oaf out of her head. Maybe Johnny could provide her some relief?

"Do you want a drink Anya?" Johnny bellowed as another upbeat song blasted through the house.

"Er yeah sure Johnny, thanks!" She replied, watching as he disappeared into the kitchen. Steve started doing hilarious dance moves around her, making her and Nancy laugh so hard they had tears in their eyes. By the time Johnny came back with her drink, Gemma had re-joined her and time became obsolete.

After another few rounds of shots, Anya was beginning to feel slightly overwhelmed. She ducked underneath a couple who were having a make-out session behind her, finding the back door and sliding outside.

The much-needed fresh air hit her lungs beautifully. The night sky was crystal clear, and a thousand stars glittered within the sea of pitch black. Anya sat on the edge of the porch, the sound of the party dulled with the door closed. She pulled out a cigarette and lighter from her bra, relaxing as she felt the nicotine course through her body. Gazing up at the sky for a while, footsteps alerted her to a presence behind her.

"Anya? Are you alright?" Gemma said as she sat down next to her friend.

"Oh yeah, I'm good. Just needed some air,"

The curly haired girl rubbed her hands together profusely. "It's a bit cold,"

"I think I have my beer jacket on," Anya looked down at her bare legs swinging freely, unable to feel the cold at all. "This is a great party,"

"I'm glad you like it. So, what's up then?" Gemma could never be fooled. She'd known Anya for too long, knew when she wasn't feeling right.

"I'm having a great time...and this party is for my birthday which I love but..."

"It's not quite the same without your Dad?" Gemma finished.

Anya nodded, tears pricking at her eyes. "It's just...we always did something, every year. Without fail, my Dad would have some grand scheme up his sleeve for my birthday...and he always said to me 'Anya, for your eighteenth we are going somewhere super special, just you wait!'. Well guess what? I am still waiting!" Her voice broke, a flood of tears running down her cheeks. "God...I miss him so much Gemma...I just...can't..."

Gemma wrapped an arm around her as Anya leant her head on her shoulder. "I know hon. It really, truly sucks. I can't even imagine how it must feel,"

Anya sniffed, sitting up and wiping her cheeks. "Ah! This is meant to be a party and look at me, I am ruining it,"

"Don't be silly. I would be worried if you didn't get emotional," Gemma wiped what Anya presumed was ruined mascara away from her face. The girls were suddenly interrupted as the back door banged open and Steve's head popped out.

"Are you coming in for shots birthday girl or what!?"

"Definitely!" Anya roared, feeling like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. They both heaved themselves up and went back inside, Anya not expecting to see Mr Hotness in all his glory standing in the

middle of her living room. Tina was grinding herself around him like she was working for tips, wearing nothing but a leotard and black leg warmers.

Billy hadn't noticed Anya yet, so she slipped into the kitchen, determined to be significantly more drunk before he became aware of her.

"Oh, Anya! We're doing tequila, you want some?" Johnny shook the bottle in his hand, a red sombrero sat atop the lid.

"Did I hear tequila?" A deep voice drawled from the kitchen door. Everyone watched as Billy strolled in, his eyes finding Anya and giving her a good few once overs. He was wearing dark, tight fitted jeans, his navy-blue shirt in his usual buttoned-down style, revealing his tanned muscled chest. A curl of his hair fell over his forehead messily, and she had the urge to reach up and brush it to the side. He looked over at Johnny, whose jaw was clenched tight. "You gonna pour some shots or are we gonna sit here like pussies and drink juice?"

Anya had a feeling this was going to end with her spewing into a bucket. She wasn't about to let Billy know that though, who was now watching her again in amusement. "You get the first one Birthday girl," He purred, handing her the shot Johnny had poured.

Anya spied the salt and limes Gemma had prepared earlier; she really was good at this party lark. Holding Billy's gaze, she licked the back of her hand and sprinkled it with salt.

The shot went down her throat like a cactus, only made marginally better as she shoved a wedge of lime into her mouth and sucked the sour juice out. A cheer echoed around the kitchen.

"Right, now you guys!" Anya managed to say, her throat a little clammed up from the alcohol. Billy, of course, made a show and a dance of his shot, roaring wildly after he downed the liquid. Some of it fell down his chin and onto his chest, and Anya had never wanted to lick tequila so much in her life.

Johnny seemed to have been unwittingly drawn into a game of shots

with Billy, who was now on his fourth. The taller, leaner guy was beginning to look green around the gills.

"Maybe you should know when you are beaten," Billy said lowly to Johnny, a strange double meaning to his words Anya couldn't quite place.

Johnny glanced at her, then back to Billy. "Man, I could do this all day."

Suddenly Gemma squealed. "I love this song, let's go Anya!" Before grabbing her wrist and pulling her from the room. Anya followed easily, hoping to God Johnny didn't throw up inside the house.

"You do know that display in there was all for you, right?" Gemma said as the pair started dancing to the deep, slow beats of the loud bass.

"Me?"

"Duh! I overheard Steve saying that Johnny wants to ask you out, I think Billy knows he likes you and is trying to out macho him or some dumb shit,"

Anya was not drunk enough for any of this. For some reason, her alcohol tolerance was high just when she wanted it to be nil. "Jesus. I can't cope with this right now,"

"Just fuck them and dance, this party is for you, not them," Gemma retorted with a grin, swaying her hips to the music. One of the girls from Anya's science class; Amy, who had also set up the lights currently flashing around the room, handed her a drink. It tasted like pure alcohol but Anya could care less, grinning at the girl before jamming away.

She caught Billy watching her dancing a few times and he had his usual x-ray vision eyes. Tina had stuck herself to him like glue and he seemed to enjoy the attention. She continued to frolic around him, her dance moves getting dirtier and dirtier the drunker she got.

Anya's attention was drawn away from the scene as she felt hands on her waist. Turning her head, she saw Johnny behind her, before he

caught her hand and span her around a few times.

Anya laughed as he mimicked ballroom dancing with her, the mixture of alcohol and low lighting making her feel giddy and finally, tipsy. Gemma was singing along to lyrics loudly next to the pair, not in the slightest bit bothered by the many guys watching her move with hungry eyes.

The next song to play was slightly slower. Anya was about to continue dancing pleasantly with Johnny, when she felt him become rigid beneath her palms. His eyes were trained on someone behind her, and she turned to see Billy Hargrove.

He had a cold, stony stare fixed on Johnny. "I want to take the birthday Princess for a spin, if you would be so kind," He smirked but the expression did not meet his eyes.

"I think that's up to her, don't you?" Johnny responded through gritted teeth.

"Johnny, it's fine," Anya said lowly, wanting to minimise the possibility of a brawl in her living room. She didn't look at Billy until Johnny had slipped away, muttering angrily under his breath. Billy didn't waste any time and she gasped as he pulled her flush against him, her hands falling onto his shoulders.

"Having fun?" Anya breathed.

Billy swiped his tongue over his teeth as he grinned. "The time of my life sweetheart," She could smell the alcohol on his breath, his cologne a strong scent of cinnamon and spice. Anya abruptly felt heady, precipitously becoming turned on from his touch. She felt his hands slide down over her waist, one of his fingers hooking into her belt. "So, you're older than me now, huh? You know, that's kinda hot,"

Anya rolled her eyes. "You are so lame."

"You know..." Billy gave a low chuckle, as if he had amused himself. "That fucking Johnny kid wants to ask you out or something like that,"

"I know," Anya couldn't look away from his eyes.

"So, what are you gonna do about it?"

"He hasn't asked me yet, so I don't know." She said truthfully, pulse beating loudly in her ears. "Why are you so interested in my dating life, anyway?"

Billy rocked his hips with hers, the movement making her feel hot with desire. She had to get away from him and break the spell he was creating, otherwise she just knew it would be she who got burned. Anya waited for his response but got none. "I think it's because you're jealous,"

He splayed his fingers over the top of her thigh. "I don't get jealous,"

Anya pulled back from him, but their faces remained close. Just one move forwards from either of them, and they would be kissing. "Good. Then you won't have to worry when I give my answer to Johnny," She pushed away from him, not even sparing a glance behind her as she disappeared into the crowd of drunken partiers.

7. Chapter 7

Stranger Love

Chapter Seven: Only in the rain

"I just had my first birthday without you. Mom and Gemma planned a party, which I think was mainly to distract me and keep my mind off the fact that you aren't here.

Not that anything really could.

I totalled my car last week and ended up in hospital. You probably would have laughed in the end. Our new neighbour... Billy, he helped me. If you had met him Dad you'd know he isn't the type to just help people so, I don't know what came over him.

I know exactly how you'd react to Billy Hargrove. You'd agree what a pain in neck he is, but I know you'd give him the benefit of the doubt. You always saw the best in people, even if they didn't themselves. I sound so cliché right now, I know, but it's the truth.

I could really use your advice right about now. Boy advice.

Yeah, don't roll in your grave. This is the point where you would say 'go ask your mother' and make a swift exit. I just really and truly don't know what to do with these god damn feelings. Why can't I be as attracted to Johnny as I am that nutcase? Life is seriously not fair.

I am eighteen years old and don't know what I am doing with myself. If I get into college, how will Mom cope on her own? If I don't get into college, will I live the rest of my life wishing? Wishing I had done more?

You have died at a really inconvenient time in my life and I am beginning to resent you for it. I need you right now Dad!" Anya exclaimed, a few tears falling down her face. "God. I am so sick of crying, I just feel so miserable all the time. I hope it's better where you are, all this life stuff is starting to get on top me to be honest." She stood up, reaching over and placing her gloved hand on the top

of the stone. "One day soon, I will sit here and tell you why."

Walking Bracken back through the fields, Anya let her mind drift. Her party lasted well towards 1am, before they had to call it a night so as not to disturb the neighbours any more than they already had. Steve and Nancy stayed behind to help Anya make a start on the clean, whilst Gemma was far too wasted, so fell face first into Anya's double bed.

She'd woken up at around 6 in the morning desperate for a pee and with a mouth dryer than gravel. Tiptoeing through the house, a shadow had caught her eye through the living room window. She looked through a gap in the curtain, towards Billy's house, to see Tina stumbling out of his back door. She turned towards him for a parting kiss but he pushed her away, saying something to her angrily before closing the door. Tina threw up her middle finger before tinkering away in her ridiculous heels, still clad in her leotard.

Anya didn't know how to feel. Part of her could care less; Billy was a player and was making his way through the Hawkins high school girls one by one. She felt a tiny bit sorry for Tina. The girl needed to stop needing male validation, it wasn't healthy. There was a very tiny part of Anya that felt jealous, but she squashed that thought like a bug very quickly indeed.

Going straight back to sleep, Anya awoke later to the smell of bacon and coffee. Both Steve and Nancy had slept on the couch in the back room, and were cooking up a hangover cure breakfast. Anya gave them both hearty kisses on their cheeks whilst Gemma threw up down the toilet.

Bracken's barking interrupted her deep thinking. Anya scanned around her, only just noticing Chief Hopper walking towards her from the opposite direction. He bent down and gave Bracken a good stroke, the dog's tail wagging furiously.

"Hey Hopper," Anya said.

"Oh hey there Anya, how you doing?" The tall man asked in his deep gruff, giving Bracken a few pats on the head on before standing straight again.

Anya nodded. "OK I guess. I...wanted to say sorry about the other night. My Mom gets crazy sometimes and I should've called,"

"I know she does. We've all been through some stuff, it's no worries."

She watched Bracken race along path after a squirrel, black tail disappearing into the brush. "What brings you out here?"

"Oh, well there is some kind of disease killing off the crops. Just going to check it out,"

"Crops?"

"Yeah, a shit tonne of pumpkins, some wheat etc. Merrel, one of the farmers is crazy mad, thinks someone is using poison," Hopper readjusted his hat. "Probably should keep that between us though,"

Anya smiled. "I won't say anything. Poor Merrel though. Those folks depend on the harvest, especially around Halloween."

"Yeah, which is why he's so mad,"

"You know, I saw a few trees back-a-ways that looked diseased, it was like a black kind of tar substance, really gross to be honest," Anya pointed behind her.

"You serious? Jesus. Well I better get going then, this will need reigning in before it becomes a real problem," He made to walk past her, his faced lined with worry lines as he frowned.

"Oh, Hopper, this might sound crazy but have there been any people who have seen...I don't know, strange things?"

The chief paused. "Strange things?"

"It's just...I saw this weird looking animal, more like a 'thing' really. It was a bit bigger than Bracken and...this will sound completely mad but it opened up its face," Anya felt idiotic saying it out loud and almost wished she'd kept her mouth shut. She watched as a flash of recognition and panic crossed his face, his eyes widening a fraction.

"It...it was probably just a stray dog, or something. Did you see it in

the dark?"

"Yes,"

"Well there you go. Our eyes play tricks on us in the dark, make us see things that might not be there. The weirdest animal you'll find in Hawkins is probably me," He smiled but it did not reach his eyes.

"Well...ok. I guess so," Anya shrugged.

"You're perfectly safe here, don't you worry. I better be getting on, see you around Anya. And say hi to your Mom," Hopper nodded at her with a tap to the brim of his hat.

"Yeah, I will, Bye," Anya replied, not at all convinced by his reaction as she watched him hurry away. He was hiding something, she just had to figure out what that something was.

...

Monday turned into Tuesday, and soon Wednesday rolled up with blackened clouds and a shit tonne of rain.

Anya rushed over to Billy's car, jumping into the passenger seat quickly as Maxine slid into the back. Billy had yet to grace them with his presence, which wasn't a surprise.

"He's such an asshole." Max grumbled, folding her arms over herself.

"I can't wait to get a new car," Anya said, watching as the windows began to steam up. "You won't have to put up with me any more either."

"I kind of like you riding with us. Billy doesn't get so angry or shout at me so much," Max said mutedly, Anya's heart sinking from her words. She was a thirteen year old girl who should have been happy and enjoying her life. Instead she was being made miserable by the guy who ought to know better.

Anya didn't have a chance to respond as Billy threw himself into the car, shaking out his hair like a dog.

"Billy!" Anya roared, now covered in water.

"Woo! Finally! Some rain to wash the shit off Hawkins," Billy sneered, starting the engine and driving off just as fast as he would normally. Anya just shook her head in disgust, not finding his behaviour amusing.

"Can you not slow down? The roads get really slippery around here," Anya pointed out, as he rounded a corner at a ridiculous speed, the tires screeching beneath them.

"I'll slow down when I fucking want to," He snapped, beating his fists wildly against the steering wheel as rock music blasted through the car interior. He was really wild today, a lot worse than she'd ever seen him before. Something must have happened at home, something bad enough to set him off.

Anya had no idea what to say to diffuse the situation. Maxine looked frightened, her blue eyes wide as she clung onto the back seats. "You are scaring Max,"

"Am I?" Billy grinned wildly. "Am I scaring you, Max?" He put his foot on the accelerator, the countryside whipping past them rapidly.

"No! I'm not scared!" Max yelled angrily, her voice shaking despite herself.

"Billy! Stop it!" Anya wanted out of the car, now. "OK fine! Max isn't scared, I am!" She was blinking back tears, hating how much he made her want to punch him and kiss him all at the same time. Billy regarded her for a moment, before he sucked his teeth loudly.

"Fucking chicks." He muttered, slowing the car down considerably.

"Thank you." Anya said, the rain beating down on the car in a natural melody.

"You know, at your birthday party, I actually think I saw you having fun." Billy voiced after a space of quiet between the three occupants.

Anya turned to him. "What?"

"I'm just saying, you're 18 years old and I hardly ever see you do anything other than work. You need to live a little Princess,"

"So, your idea of living a little is speeding down a slippery road and hoping to God we don't all die in a ditch?" Anya asked him, perplexed by his statement. She knew how to have fun, didn't she?

"It's called living on the edge. Not giving a fuck, doing what you want when you want," He flicked his lighter open to flame his cigarette. "These are the golden years kiddo,"

"I know how to have fun! You aren't in my life 24/7, you don't know what I do!" Anya fumed, her face reddening.

Billy smiled wickedly at her, melting her from the inside out. "You forget, we're neighbours. I know,"

"That's just creepy to be honest Billy," Anya deadpanned.

"I bet you haven't even applied for college. You'll end up spending your entire life in Hawkins, marry some hick guy, have a few kids, work in the diner until you're too old to do anything and then wake up one day a miserable OAP who regrets her entire life," Billy laughed sardonically whilst flicking his cigarette out of the window, splashes of rain coming inside the car momentarily.

Anya felt his words physically, as if each syllable was a weight being added, until she could no longer lift herself up. How did he know her biggest fear? That she would indeed spend the rest of her life in Hawkins, never seeing the world, never writing any music. The anger she was feeling was because deep down, she knew he was right.

She'd be damned if she told him that, though. "I have applied to college, actually."

"Let me guess, Hawkins community college?" Billy grinned at his own self-certified genius.

"You really aren't as funny as you think you are. If you want to play this game, fine. You know what I think about you? I think you will end up leaving school after failing, get a deadbeat job somewhere, wallow in self-loathing at how pathetic your life is and then die alone

because you've driven everybody who ever cared about you away." Anya could see his knuckles whiten around the steering wheel. She hated how he managed to drag out the worst in her. She wasn't a nasty, vindictive person, yet Billy made her want to hurt him.

She immediately regretted her words, however, as Billy's silence was suddenly much louder than his voice.

Maxine was very quiet in the back, obviously not keen on getting involved. Anya didn't know how a simple ride to school could create such tension and chaos. Relief flooded her bones as they pulled into the school parking lot, full of students rushing into the building out of the lashing rain.

Without a word, Anya exited the car and ran into school, not looking back. She was half way to her locker when she felt a hand encase her upper arm. With barely time to yell out, Anya was yanked into an empty classroom, the door slammed shut behind her.

Billy loomed over her, hair soaking wet with the rain, his skin shining with droplets. Her heart was in her mouth as they gazed at one another, his eyes a mixture of anger, lust and frustration.

Anya closed her eyes, allowing his lips to fall onto hers. Their kiss clashed like a lightning bolt, his mouth hot and desperate. She returned it feverishly, hands wrapping around his shoulders, fingers tangling into his damp tendrils. Her back hit the classroom door, their bodies impossibly close as their kiss deepened. She heard, no felt, a deep growl produce from his chest, his hand slipping down to yank her leg up around his waist.

It was euphoric. A dance of fireworks depleting any sense of time, the world around them disappearing into one of just she and him.

But then reality began to kick in.

Anya shoved Billy's large body away from her. They were both completely breathless, her lips feeling swollen and sore. She stared at him with wide eyes, unable to think coherently. Yanking open the classroom door, Anya made a quick dash down the corridor, away from him.

Away from his searing kiss.

8. Chapter 8

Stranger Love

Chapter Eight: Jealousy Is the Colour Green

One Year Earlier:

"Anya, honey, will you go home already?"

Anya looked up from wiping down the tables, her hair starting to fall out of its ponytail. "Yeah just one more table,"

"This place is so clean you could eat off the floor, get!" Her Dad nudged her playfully. "You have school tomorrow,"

"I know," Anya replied absently, wiping down the last table before scooping up her homework from the counter. "I finished my homework, so you can stop worrying about that,"

"You need to start focusing on school, cut your hours back here. Your senior year is coming up and your grades are more important than this place," Benny pointed a mildly stern finger at her. He never was that great at the discipline thing, favouring a more relaxed parental approach. Luckily for him, Anya hadn't been much trouble as a kid. "That school in New York is the goal,"

"Don't worry Dad, I will be fine. How long have I been working here whilst going to school? Plus I love this place, it's home," Anya slapped her hand on the plastic counter with gumption.

"Yeah, for now, until you become rich and famous," He grinned at her. "And when you do, just remember who your favourite parent is,"

Anya laughed. "Hey! Poor Mom, I can't have a favourite!"

"Yeah yeah. Keep tellin' yourself that,"

She just rolled her eyes humorously, deciding to ease his worry and head home. Benny ran his hand over his short hair whilst counting the takings for the day, which wasn't much. It always quietened in

the diner around this time of year; people favouring staying in their warm homes rather than venturing out in the cold.

Anya paced over to the jukebox, sliding in a coin. Soon Carole King's 'Way Over Yonder' filled the small diner. It was one of his favourites. "There. You have until the end of this song to close up and come home,"

Benny nodded, saluting her. "Yes Ma'am,"

She flashed him one last smile before throwing on her coat and leaving. Anya knew it would take him longer than the four minutes of the song for him to finish, but the sentiment was still the same. It was an old trick he'd used when she was little, when she wanted to stay up with him instead of going to bed.

It was around 10:45pm, half an hour after Anya had arrived home, that the doorbell rang. She thought for a moment it was her Dad. Maybe he had forgotten his keys? But that was very unlikely, her Dad had never forgotten his house keys once.

Patricia answered. Anya, curious, stepped into the hallway, seeing Hopper's looming presence in the threshold. He removed the hat from his head, a solemn expression on his face.

"I'm sorry to have to...to do this...there has been an...incident at the diner,"

"Where is Benny?" Patricia asked sharply, peering around Hopper.

"Your husband...when we found him we tried to help, but it was too late. Patricia, Benny has passed away," Hopper could barely speak, his voice laced with deep sadness.

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous, my husband is at work, he is coming home soon!" Patricia voiced. "Benny? Benny!?" She called, stepping out of the house to find him.

Hopper gently took her arm. "Patricia, I'm sorry, but he isn't coming home,"

"You're lying! You are a liar! Where is Benny? Tell me where he is!"

Patricia screamed, her voice an octave higher than normal with distress. Tears were streaming down her pale face, the realisation of Hopper's news hitting her smack in the chest.

Hopper then held onto her mother as she sobbed and wailed into the night.

Anya did nothing. She remained stood in the hallway, her body completely numb. She couldn't feel the cold air of the night filtering in from the open door, nor could she hear her mother's screams. Her entire world was crumbling before her eyes and she just stood there, watching as it did.

Present Day:

Anya remembered that numb sensation. She remembered the total shut down of any feelings, empathy or emotion, a wall of ice forming between her and the rest of the world. It had taken many months for that wall of ice to melt away, and she constantly worried about the day it would return.

This numbness was not what she was experiencing, however, after kissing Billy Hargrove. The encounter had awoken her once more; made her hyper sensitive to his touch, his heat, his smell. She could taste the smoke and mint gum from his mouth, hear the guttural groan he'd made from their joining. Anya could smell his cologne in her nostrils, the heady mix of musk and cinnamon spice.

Her heart had not stopped pounding. She wanted more of him and that feeling. Heat pooled between her thighs, made worse by how tight her jeans were.

She was extremely hot and bothered.

Taking refuge in the girl's bathroom, which luckily was vacant, she leant her hands on the edge of the sink. Her reflection mirrored her feelings. Lips swollen and sore, the thin skin over her clavicle and chest flushed a deep red.

Anya pulled out her compact brush, needing something to do as a distraction.

"Anya, there you are! I've been looking all over," Gemma exclaimed as she barged into the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a bright blue scarf to protect it from the rain. She took one look at Anya and her brown eyes widened. "What the hell happened to you?"

Anya started putting on some lip balm. "Something I can't afford to let anyone else know about,"

Gemma immediately started pushing open the cubicle doors to check for anyone lurking. "If there is anyone in here they better get out!" She roared.

After no one responded, Anya turned away from the mirrors. "I just kissed Billy Hargrove. In an empty classroom."

Gemma's lips formed an 'O' shape. "Oh lordy! Lordy Lordy! No wonder you look like a hot mess,"

"It's probably the worst and best thing that I've ever done,"

"Is he a good kisser?"

"Yes. Jesus that's not the point! I need you to tell me what to do,"

Gemma smirked. "Well, I know what I would do. Billy Hargrove."

"That's not helping." Anya sighed. "I can't do this. I can't get involved with him, he is a heartbreaker and I just don't know if I can take any more of that in my life,"

Her friend nodded, using her fingers to tease Anya's hair out a bit. "Anya, sometimes it's OK to have a bit of fun, you know?"

"You sound like Billy. We practically ripped each other's throats out on the car ride here, then suddenly we were..."

"Making out?" Gemma's eyebrows wagged. "You have chemistry, so what? You wouldn't be the first people in history to just have sex because it feels good, not because you are deeply in love."

Anya didn't know if it was just feelings of lust. She knew she wanted him, for sure, but something nagged at the back of her brain. Her

feelings were more than physical for him and she hated it. "I just don't think it is that simple."

"Then tell him it was a onetime thing," Gemma flicked some gloss over her full lips. "Better to be straight with him,"

"Yeah...that's what I'll do..." Anya checked her appearance once more, satisfied she looked less of a dishevelled mess. The two girls linked arms and walked to class together, running away as Mrs Barter hurtled towards them, no doubt to scream at them for their tardiness.

...

The weather had improved significantly by the time school finished. The dull grey clouds were clearing, allowing what was left of the sun to gleam over the puddles and droplets over the concrete.

Anya was now determined to get the whole Billy situation sorted. She headed towards him, where she could see him leaning against his car. Tina was talking to him flirtatiously, and Anya wondered if the girl ever left him alone.

"Anya! Anya Hey!" Johnny interrupted her stride.

"Oh, hey Johnny," She smiled, the pair stopping to face one another.

"How are you?" He asked, looking slightly nervous in a very endearing way. "I had a great time at your party, sorry I didn't stick around, had to get a ride home and to be honest I don't remember much,"

Anya laughed. "Yeah, me neither really. Too much tequila,"

They both stood there looking at each other for moment. Anya could feel a pair of eyes on them from the other side of the lot but ignored it.

"Are you busy Friday?" Johnny's face flushed as he said it.

"I..." She started to answer but faltered. Technically she was busy on Friday, she was working at the diner. But then Billy's voice echoed around her brain, making her blood boil with anger. Even Gemma

had hinted that she needed to loosen up a bit, enjoy her youth whilst she still could. What harm would it do to go out with Johnny for the night? "No. I'm free,"

Johnny visibly relaxed. "Oh cool! I just wondered if you wanted to go out? Get some pizza?"

"Yeah, sounds awesome,"

"Great! I will pick you up around 7?" Johnny rubbed the back of his head as he smiled.

"Yeah sure, 7 is good," Anya felt a slight pang of guilt hit her in the stomach. She was conflicted between her feelings, unsure if she would ever respond to Johnny the way she did to Billy. Johnny had a pleased look on his handsome face, his parting words of goodbye sweet, just like him.

Billy was watching her as she strode over to him, Tina still chewing his ear off.

"We need to talk."

"He's busy," Tina snapped, her face twisted into a sneer.

"Like, right now," Anya ignored the brunette, not interested in anything she had to say. Billy just stared at her intently, his eyes a mask, like a curtain had been drawn over them.

"Fine. Tina, go away," He gestured her to leave with his hand, almost like Anya would with Bracken. Even though Tina was a bit of handful, she did not deserve to be treated like a dog. The curly haired girl scowled at him and then Anya, before stalking away.

"You back for round two Princess?" Billy grinned.

"You do realise it's your own fault Tina won't leave you alone? She's obsessed with you," Anya replied, disregarding how his proximity was making her feel.

"Whatever. She's easy,"

Anya made to retort but stopped herself. She had to focus on her end goal. "Look, about what happened this morning. It was a onetime thing, OK? Never to be repeated,"

"Right. Well you keep telling yourself that sweetheart," Billy flicked his eyes to her lips, sauntering closer. "You were very responsive, if I recall correctly,"

She used her hand to push him away from her. "Listen carefully. This, you and me? Never going to happened. I had a moment of madness. Hell will freeze over before I do it again,"

Billy just gave a mocking laugh, licking his lips as he gazed at her. "Whatever you say, Anya. So, what did Johnny boy want with you then? To ask you out? What are you gonna do, eat candyfloss and ride the Ferris wheel?" He sneered, Anya feeling a flare of anger hit her right in the gut.

"No, actually. We are going for pizza."

He seemed to change then. Like a light switch, one second he was smiling scathingly and the next he was glowering down at her. "Right. Well you go and have fun with that fucking small-town farmer boy. Maybe he'll fuck you as good as he does his cows," He strode over to the passenger side of his car.

"Fuck you Billy!" Anya exclaimed.

"No Anya, fuck you! You should probably get Johnny to give you a ride home because I ain't fucking doing it anymore!" Billy threw open his door and fell into the car, revving up the engine loudly.

"Billy! What about Max?!" Anya yelled as he drove away with the roar of his engine. She let out a groan of frustration, realising she now had to find a ride for both she and Maxine, or they were both going to be walking.

She was half way back to school when she heard a beep. Johnny was sat in his car and waved at her, gesturing her inside. Anya hopped in eagerly, the pair waiting for Max to leave the middle school.

The ride home was a lot less loud and certainly felt safer.

It just wasn't quite the same.

9. Chapter 9

Stranger Love

Chapter Nine: Pizza and Demogorgon's

"How many times did you go to practise before you realised you weren't cut out for it?" Anya asked Johnny through a mouthful of pizza, the pair chuckling as they conversed.

"I went to basketball six weeks in a row. Coach pretty much told me to leave," Johnny laughed, wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "Poor Steve, he was the one who talked me up too. Never made that mistake again!"

Anya smiled, thoroughly enjoying herself. Regardless of their relationship status, Johnny was very good company. He spoke animatedly about interesting topics, and seemed sincerely interested in her life. He was also very funny and the two of them had been giggling like idiots for over an hour.

"Do you still sing? I remember you doing the lead in one of the school musicals," He asked.

Anya covered her face with her hand in embarrassment. "Oh god, that was so bad! Mom still gets the tape out sometimes, it's awful,"

"No! You were amazing! I remember thinking to myself; this girl is going to be famous one day,"

"Well...I do still sing. I like to write lyrics, you know?"

Johnny nodded enthusiastically. "Can you still play like, twenty instruments?"

Anya laughed at his overexaggeration. "Not quite twenty! I play the piano and guitar, it's nothing amazing,"

His brown eyes were open and honest as they looked at her from across the plastic table, the small pizza joint full of Hawkins residents. "Will you play for me one time?"

"Sure, but you have to promise not to laugh," She pointed at him sternly, though a smile played on her lips. He held up his hands in surrender with a lopsided grin on his face.

"Never!"

The large pizza they had between them was slowly being demolished. Anya felt completely at ease with Johnny, there was no awkwardness, no feeling of anxiety. So why did she not feel the same butterflies she did when she was with Billy?

"Where do you want to go to college?" Anya said, ignoring her inner turmoil.

"Oh no, the old college question...I didn't exactly apply," He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "It's not that I can't get in to one...it's just, I don't really want to go, you know?"

"That's cool. I mean if it's going to make you happy then do it. My Dad always said that no matter what I did, I had to make sure it's what I wanted to do, not what everyone else wanted,"

"I wish my Mom and Dad had the same view! Honestly, they get on my case every single time. I don't want to spend the next three years of my life doing more exams and essays and stuff. I want to get a job, save some money and travel," He picked up another slice of pizza. "See more of the world than this tiny little town,"

"That sounds amazing," She just about heard the music change to a Kiss track, reminding her instantly of Billy and his ridiculous driving. "I would love to go travelling, but there is a music college in New York I really want to get into,"

"You suit the college vibe. I can picture you going to classes and hanging with cool music people, going to all the awesome gigs and that,"

Anya took a gulp of her pepsi, beginning to feel extremely full. She let her eyes scan the place for a moment and froze in place when she saw Billy Hargrove and Tina burst through the doors. "Shit." She voiced without thinking, the look on her face prompting Johnny to

spin around in his booth.

"Fuck," He muttered angrily, the relaxed atmosphere Anya had been enjoying extinguished like the flame of a candle.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Anya groaned, convinced if she slouched in her seat, he may not see her.

"I think I know," Johnny growled.

Billy was already stalking over, Tina rushing behind him like a stray dog. "Well well, what a coincidence," He drawled, running his tongue over his straight white teeth.

"Yeah, a coincidence." Anya retorted sarcastically.

"Hey, it's a small-town baby. Not my fault," He leant his hand on the booth Anya occupied, leaning into their table. "You two kids having fun on your PG date? When is curfew, 7pm?"

"Dude, you're seriously pathetic. Why don't you just go away?" Johnny voiced, his face reddening in annoyance.

Billy's eyes narrowed, a glowering, aggressive look filling his features. "How about, you go and fuck yourself, Johnny boy?"

"Billy, come on, let's just go," Tina whined from behind him. Even she looked fed up of his antics, casting Anya an apologetic and embarrassed glance.

Johnny just gave a scathing laugh towards Billy. "Anya isn't interested in you; do you understand that? You never had a chance in hell with her,"

"Is that so?" Billy looked down at Anya and she felt her heart stop. "She's got everyone in this town convinced she's a perfect little saint. The way she kisses is quite the opposite, isn't that right Anya?"

The silence that followed his words said it all. Johnny was staring at her, Tina was flitting her gaze from Anya to Billy, and Billy just grinned wolfishly, all too pleased with himself.

"What is he talking about?" Johnny asked her, his fists clenched tightly.

"It was just one kiss. It meant nothing," Anya all but whispered, feeling tears prick at the back of her eyes. "It was a mistake,"

"Yeah, a good mistake," Billy let each syllable fall from his tongue like melted chocolate.

"You told me you weren't interested in him!" Tina said furiously to Anya, turning on her heel and slamming the door as she left. Johnny seemed to be in two minds about the whole situation, but soon also stood from his seat.

"Of all the guys in Hawkins, it had to be him," He gestured his hand towards Billy, the pair scowling harshly at one another before Johnny too stomped out, throwing some money on the table before he left.

"Johnny! Wait!" Anya called after him, grabbing her coat. "Are you happy now?" She seethed at Billy, who grabbed her arm as she moved past him.

"I'm not the one lying to myself, Anya."

She yanked her arm from his grasp forcefully, a glare of red misting over her eyes. "Don't you touch me! I hate you!"

Anya didn't stop to see his reaction. Her words were like acid in her mouth, the taste foul and sickly. Never in her life had she told someone she hated them – because no one had warranted such an emotion from her. She could feel a mixture of pure abhorrence and desire coursing through her veins and she was beginning to feel overwhelmed by it.

Johnny was still strolling over to his car as Anya raced over to him. "Johnny! Please, wait?"

"I don't think there is much left to say, Anya," He said, only turning to face her as he reached the passenger door of his car. "You clearly have some unfinished business with Billy and I'm not going to get in your way,"

Anya closed her eyes for a second and shook her head. "You don't understand... let me just explain?"

"I'm not a scapegoat, you can't use me to try and get rid of your feelings," Johnny was clearly hurt but there was also anger in his eyes. "If you like Billy that's fine, but I think you'll live to regret it,"

"Johnny! Johnny don't go!" Anya cried as he got into his car, watching helplessly as he drove off into the night. She let out a frustrated cry into the empty street. A billow of condensation left her mouth as she buttoned up her green coat, wrapping her scarf around her neck quickly. The evening had started off so well...and now it was just a disaster.

She should have known better than to get involved with Billy Hargrove. He was a narcissistic bastard who craved chaos and pain. Yet somewhere in her brain came that nagging sensation again, that Billy was not that person. He had a different side, a better side. One that knew empathy and kindness.

Common sense would dictate otherwise, but since when did love ever coincide with that?

She didn't realise she'd been crying until a few tears fell down her neck. Anya wiped them from her face, deciding the best course of action was to walk to Benny's. Hopefully Charles was still working and he could give her a ride home.

...

Anya had never been more grateful for the weekend. She had two days to collect herself before the onslaught of Tina's wrath, which she knew would be hellish. The whole school would soon know that she and Billy made out and whilst this wasn't end of the world news, it certainly meant she was going to get some grief.

She'd called Johnny's house so many times that his parents had told her to stop ringing. He was clearly still upset with her and she couldn't really blame him, though she wished he would allow her to explain, even if just to put a few things straight.

Especially the part about hurting anyone. Anya's biggest regret was the hurt she had caused Johnny and Tina. It just wasn't in her nature to cause anyone misery or pain, finding the very notion sickening.

She called Gemma, who immediately came over to hear her tale of woe. The pair then ranted about boys and watched a few girlie films whilst inhaling pistachio flavoured ice cream. Her Mom soon came home from working at the diner and joined them, pouring them all a glass of wine before they continued their attack on the entire race of boys.

By the time Anya got to sleep, she felt a lot better knowing that at least she had a couple of folks who were on her side. She just had to endure a few weeks of beratement from her fellow class mates until the next scandal graced the halls of Hawkins High.

How hard could it be?

Monday morning came sooner than Anya would have liked, and she jumped up from the couch when she heard the beep of Gemma's car outside. She completely ignored Billy, who was waiting next to his Camaro with a cigarette in hand. She could feel his eyes on her as she slid into Gemma's car and instantly relaxed once they drove away.

"Jeeze, he was giving you the broody eyes," Gemma said above the radio blasting Cyndi Lauper.

"He can do whatever he likes. I could care less," Anya turned up the music, trying to deflate the growing balloon of nerves in the pit of her stomach. She regretted not pretending to be sick and staying home in bed, where she was safe and warm.

Of course, the walk through the hallways of school seemed endless and Anya was waiting for Tina to pounce. She realised this must be what it felt like to be a mouse out in the open, always weary that a bird of prey may swoop down with large claws and carry them to their death.

She needed to bite the bullet and confront Tina first, that was the only way. Anya scanned around the busy hallways. Finally, she caught a glimpse of the curly haired brunette, leaning against the

wall near the girl's bathroom with Carol and Penny.

"Tina," Anya said. "Can we talk?"

Tina's eyes narrowed as she pushed herself from the wall, folding her arms tightly. "I guess."

Anya was surprised. The two girls moved to a more secluded part of the hall, and Anya wondered for a moment if maybe this was some sort of trap. "Look, about Friday-"

"Listen here you slut. If it were up to me I would have told every single person in this school about you and Billy," Tina spat.

"What do mean if were up to you?" Anya asked in surprise.

"You have all these guys wrapped around your little skanky finger, don't you? The only reason I haven't said anything is cuz Billy asked me to, OK? You're lucky he has some dirt on me that I don't want gettin' out," She looked infuriated. "Feel free to have Billy all to yourself. He ended things between us."

Anya said nothing as Tina marched away indignantly. She leant against the wall for moment, wondering how on earth she'd managed to end up in the position she was in. If Billy expected her to fall at his feet now, he had another thing coming. She was still furious with him, mostly due to the fact it had been him who'd caused all this mess in the first place.

"I told you, Dart is from the upside down!"

Anya heard Mike's anguished voice and frowned, wondering what on earth he was talking about. She edged closer to the corner of the wall, unseen by the boys.

"Look, he is little, OK? The most harm he can do right now is wiggle his cute tail," Dustin added.

"Yeah, until he becomes a Demogorgon and opens up his face, and then starts eating people!"

She gasped quietly. Opened up his face? That could not be a

coincidence! They were talking about the creature she'd seen on the road, the reason her car was destroyed. Anya pulled out her notepad, writing down 'upside down' 'Demogorgon' and 'dart' quickly.

"Whatever Mike! You just think you are right about everything. I am going to show Mr Clarke after school and see what he thinks," Dustin's footsteps could be heard walking away down the empty corridor.

Anya waited until she heard the other's leave for class, now more determined than ever to find out what those creatures were, and if they had anything to do with her father's death.

...

10. Chapter 10

Stranger Love

Chapter Ten: Sorry seems to be the hardest word

The air was full of what looked like snow. Flakes of it swirling into the air, never quite touching the ground, leaving no dusting or trace it even existed.

Anya stood on the threshold of her home, only, it wasn't home.

It was naturally dark in this place. A place she recognised but also didn't. The town of Hawkins was shrouded in a cloak of death, her ears hearing the shrieks of the creature she was now convinced was real.

A figure was walking towards her. Anya squinted, unable to move from her spot. She was beginning to fight the stillness of her own body, wanting desperately to be able to move and run away. The person walking towards her was a child. Anya could see their short, curly brown hair. She couldn't see a face.

"Who are you?" Anya called out.

The child stretched out one arm towards her. Suddenly Anya was thrown backwards, landing heavily on her back.

She gasped for the breath that had been knocked out of her. The scenery had changed, and she was now in the diner, her father before her. A gun shot rang through the air and he went limp, falling to the ground as blood poured from his wound.

Anya screamed.

She sat up, leaping out of bed as if the mattress was on fire. Her heart was racing as she gasped for breath, tears falling down her cheeks as she recalled the image of her father's death. She didn't know if she'd screamed out loud, or only in her nightmare.

Her Mom had not stirred, though Patricia was notoriously a very

heavy sleeper. Anya tiptoed down the stairs to make herself some hot chocolate, unconvinced she would be able to sleep for the rest of the night.

Taking her hot chocolate and guitar to the back porch, Anya wrapped herself in her oversized fleece, taking a seat on a lounge. There was a song she had not sung since her Dad's death, one that he'd always loved and she'd listened to a thousand times. It was the only way to rid her mind of her dream, to try and figure out who that child was.

"Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup, they slither while they pass, they slip away across the universe... Pools of sorrow waves of joy are drifting through my opened mind, possessing and caressing me..."

Her voice was soft. She did not sing too loudly due to the time of night, a blanket of stars covering the black sky. Bracken curled up on the floor next to Anya's feet, perfectly contented.

They were wrong. Those people who said time was a healer. That it would make it easier for her to come to terms with her Dad's death. Time was not a healer, it only created a space, a space for the pain to become ever stronger.

Anya finished singing and her voice broke, tears falling from her eyes. Would she ever run out of tears? She thought she would have by now.

A rustling sound made her jump and she looked to her left. Billy was stood just yonder to the porch and for a moment they both just stared at one another. Anya wondered how long he had been standing there for, having not spoken to him for the clear majority of the week. She stood up quickly, making to march back into the house.

"Anya-" He began.

"Don't." She replied. "I don't want to hear it,"

"So, is this it then? You just gonna ignore me for the rest of the year?" He said in a louder voice, stepping closer to the porch. "Thought you might have gotten over it now, you know?"

"Well, you thought wrong." She made to leave, but a thought stopped her and she turned back to him. "Do you honestly think, because you got Tina to keep her mouth shut about what happened between us, that I was going to come running to you like some love-sick puppy?"

Billy scoffed. "Well, a thank you wouldn't exactly kill you,"

"Are you serious right now?" Anya hissed as quietly as possible. "If you hadn't crashed my date, I wouldn't have needed you to do that in the first place!"

"I did you a favour. Johnny boy is not the guy for you,"

"Well thank you, oh mighty love guru," Anya retorted sarcastically. "You know what the worst part is? You managed to hurt all three of us in one fell swoop, and you don't seem to care at all,"

She leaned down to grab her guitar, deciding she'd had enough of talking to him. Billy had managed to edge even closer. He wore a loosely fitted white tank top that showed off his muscled arms, a gold necklace with a small round medallion hanging around his neck. He looked so normal standing there, as if there wasn't a torrent of emotions raging through his body.

"Anya...look...I'm sorry, OK?"

Anya froze mid step. Had her ears deceived her? "What?"

"I said...I'm sorry, capiche?" Billy looked uncomfortable, apologising was clearly not second nature to him. "I messed up,"

A beat of silence stretched between them, the only sound that of the wind curling through the trees. Anya could see he was earnest, in the only way Billy could be. Being honest and talking about his feelings was not something she reckoned he did much of, especially with Neil being the way that he was. Anya wondered how stunted this boy standing in front of her really was emotionally, and how damaging it was going to be in his future life.

"Thanks...for your apology," Anya said.

"Is that it?"

"What exactly do you want me to say?"

Billy shrugged in annoyance. "I don't know, that you forgive me?" He was right in front of her now. He wasn't wearing any cologne, so now all she could smell was clean soap and peppermint. It was enough to send her senses wild, enough to lower her inhibitions.

"It's not that simple, Billy."

"It never is with you, is it?" He was manoeuvring her against the wall, like a wolf cornering its prey.

"Billy," Anya warned. He ignored her, cupping her face gently in his large hand. Anya's pulse quickened, the look of desire in his eyes almost too much for her to take. He ran his thumb over her bottom lip, their faces so close now she could feel his breath on her cheek.

She inclined her head and breached the tiny gap between them. They kissed lightly, his mouth like a feather. She felt one of his hands slide into her hair, hand splayed at the back of her skull. Anya sighed, the noise inciting him to kiss her with more fervour.

Her hands found his hair once more, keeping him in place as they deepened the kiss together. She wanted more, more of this wonderful feeling. Billy wrapped a strong arm around her, pulling her into his much larger body.

Frustration towards him made her bite down hard on his bottom lip. Billy groaned deeply, the sound like music to her ears. She felt his hands clench at her tightly, one now slipping beneath the material of her fleece. He started assaulting her neck with his mouth, every single fibre of her being exploding with fireworks.

"...where the hell are you? Billy!"

The voice sounded far away at first, but then became louder and louder. Anya quickly realised it was Billy's father, the man bellowing loudly despite the late hour. Billy let out a string of curses into her ear, both aware of how exposed they were.

"You should probably go," Anya said, her voice breathy and weak.

"Billy!?" Neil's voice was getting closer.

"I hate him." Billy said honestly, untangling himself from Anya. She instantly felt lost without the contact, a mixture of regret and elation flowing through her nerves. He pushed himself away from the wall. "Guess I will see you around then, Anya,"

Anya stayed where she was. "Yeah. I guess so,"

She watched as he left, hearing the heated exchange between father and son before they re-entered the house and shut the door.

Anya put her hand to her slightly swollen lips. He was still there, she could feel him in her skin. Her cheeks were hot, whole body flushed and surging with desire. It just wasn't enough to feel his kiss. She wanted more.

"What the hell are you doing Anya?" She asked herself, scooping up her guitar quickly.

Sleep was not on the cards tonight.

...

The next morning, Anya left the house with a cassette tape in her hand.

Billy was leaning against his car as usual, smoking a cigarette. He watched her as she approached, looking slightly surprised.

"Where is Max? Is she running late?" She asked, opening the passenger door for herself.

"I'm here!" Max called as she rolled towards them on her board. If she was wondering why Anya was riding with them again, she did not voice it. Billy was still looking at Anya with mild surprise, though soon regained his usual composure.

"Both of you get in then, I don't got all day," He drawled, sliding into the car. "So, you finally decided to ride to school in a real car again?"

Anya did her best not to flush at his gaze. "No, this is just way more

convenient. Anyway, considering your apology and all, I think to make it up to me we should play some music I like,"

Billy was already shaking his head. "No, no fucking way,"

"Yes." Anya winked at Max as she caught her reflection in the mirror. The redhead bit back a smile, her usual quiet self.

The ride to school consisted of Anya blasting Fleetwood Mac from Billy's car and him complaining about it solidly the entire way.

...

Anya is singing - 'Across the Universe' by The Beatles.

11. Chapter 11

Stranger Love

Chapter Eleven:

"So, you coming to Tina's Halloween party?"

Anya looked up from her folder to see Billy. He was leaning against the neighbouring lockers casually, hair perfectly sculpted as per usual. She caught his blue eyes, feeling her stomach drop into her feet.

"Er, no. I have other plans," She replied, snapping her work book shut.

"What other plans?" He implored, his brow furrowing.

"Just...plans."

Billy rolled his eyes, running his tongue over his bottom lip as he smirked. "Baby, come on. We both know you are just gonna be sitting at home, listening to your whiny music and painting your nails or whatever."

Anya let out a long breath from her nose. He was right, of course. She had no plans whatsoever for Halloween and was quite eager for it to be over. "Tina doesn't want me at that party,"

"Fuck Tina."

"I thought you already had." Anya deadpanned, grabbing a book for English and closing over her locker.

"Don't get smart,"

"I don't have to," She flashed him a cheeky grin, and for a moment she saw a look in his eyes she'd never seen before... it almost looked like...warmth. Her smile faded quickly as Johnny walked past, a stony expression on his face as he glanced at the pair of them. "Shit." Anya muttered.

Billy just smiled widely. "He still got a stick up his ass?"

"It would seem so," She ran her hand into her hair for a moment, wondering how on earth she could get Johnny to at least speak to her again. He seemed hell bent on holding a grudge, which wasn't something she thought he was capable of. Billy must have really gotten under his skin.

"Anyway. Party?" Billy asked.

Anya quirked an eyebrow at him. "Why are you so keen for me to go?"

"Because, I don't want to roll up to this lame party on my own,"

"Well, you just going to have to suck it up. If I even went it would be with Gemma," She started making her way down the busy corridor to class, Billy trailing after her like a lost puppy.

"Oh, come on Princess! I thought you were meant to be fun? Or was that all just talk?"

"I don't really fancy going to a party where the host hates me, thank you very much,"

"Look, you will be with me, alright? If Tina's got anything to say I will out her,"

Anya stopped walking, turning to face him. "Whatever you have on her is pretty bad, isn't it?"

He shrugged, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I don't actually have anything on her. I just made her believe I did. It was pretty easy - she's a dumb bitch,"

His words made her falter. "You...did all that, just so she wouldn't tell everyone about us? Why?"

"Well, the look on her face was worth it. Plus, she obviously has something really bad to hide," Billy's eyes widened slightly as Anya started to smile. "What?"

She pointed at him. "You did a good thing,"

He shook his head vigorously. "No, no no, don't get crazy,"

"You did it because you felt guilty. Ha!" Anya beamed, realising it was she who was walking towards him and him who was backing away this time. "You have a conscious, admit it!"

"Hell no! I did it because it's fun to mess with people," Billy retorted, though his face had grown a little red. His expression was extremely endearing.

"I knew your little façade was bull. You did a good deed!" Anya said in a sing song voice as they stopped walking, Billy back meeting the cold wall. The pair of them were oblivious to their surroundings, and by now, the corridor was empty.

She poked his chest lightly, slightly startled when he grabbed her hand as if to push it away. The touch sent a bolt of electricity through her body, her heart racing faster than ever before. She gazed up at him, faces close enough for her to smell the mint on his breath. His eyes were a sea of blue in a storm, waves crashing behind them with destructive force. For the first time, Anya was beginning to realise she was falling for Billy Hargrove.

There was no stopping it. No denying it. Anya had tried in vain to stomp her feelings away, to ignore the way he made her feel. Did he feel the same? Was he experiencing the torturous pleasure of her company? Billy was not an open book. He was closed off, guarded and damaging. Not just to himself, but to others around him.

And yet she wanted him.

They were inches from kissing when Mrs Barter's loud roars echoed throughout the corridor. She hadn't reach the pair yet, who were slightly hidden from view. Billy quickly grabbed Anya's hand and they both fled.

"You two! Get back here right now!" Mrs Barter screamed. Anya kept running, their pace rapid as they exited the school.

He led them to his car without hesitation and she slid in willingly,

the engine booming to life before the car was hurtling out of the lot.

For a moment, they sat in stunned silence. Then Anya started to laugh – a real, honest to God laugh. She hadn't felt adrenaline like that since, well, since her father died. Anya didn't even know how long it had been since she'd just...let go. Done something stupid and spontaneous. She'd forgotten the feeling completely...until now.

Billy was laughing as well, and he looked so innocent and carefree that for a moment Anya forgot how he really was. She wished he would show this side more – the side he hid so well. She wasn't naïve, wasn't one of these girls who thought 'I can change him', but maybe, just maybe...he could change.

He kept driving for a while longer before pulling over. They were down a narrow lane covered with trees, the place quiet and secluded. Anya turned to face him as the engine died, their smiles fading into ones of desire.

He leant over and captured her lips quickly. She responded without hesitation, their kiss feverish and hot. Anya slid her hands into his hair as she opened her mouth, a moan leaving his throat as their tongues danced together. Anya groaned quite loudly as he nipped at her bottom lip, the pain sending shockwaves through her body.

A heat was pooling between her legs. Anya knew it was different this time – they were both getting desperate. She quickly manoeuvred herself over him, straddling his waist. The steering wheel pressed into her back, Billy clumsily grasping at the lever to slide the chair as far back as it would go. Anya's body was thrown onto him with a thump and she ended up headbutting him.

"Ow." She mumbled, grinning down at him.

"I know you hate me, but you don't gotta try and kill me," Billy replied, a little breathlessly. Anya responded with a rather undignified giggle, finding the whole situation unbelievable. For a moment, he just looked up at her, one of his hands tracing over her face before cupping her jaw softly. "You sure about this Princess?"

Anya wondered if her eyes were dilated – she felt alive, aroused and

all together in need of him. "No. But who is?"

Billy pulled her head down and kissed her again. Anya closed her eyes, enveloped in pleasure. She whined a little as his large hands skimmed her jean clad thighs, his grip tightening at the sound.

They were past the point of no return, consequences be damned.

...

Anya opened the bag of chips, pouring the snack into a large bowl. She and Gemma were having a movie night, something they hadn't done in a long while.

Of course, her best friend had known instantly that Anya was hiding something, or rather, someone. Her escapade with Billy had not gone unnoticed, even when Anya had tried to come up with a reasonable excuse.

In the end, resistance was futile.

Gemma nearly fell off her seat in homeroom as Anya explained what had happened that fateful morning. It was the day after, and Anya hadn't spoken much to Billy. She needed time, space away from him to gather her thoughts on the whole situation.

She still felt hot and bothered just thinking about Billy Hargrove and their shenanigans in his car. It had been hot, intense and all-round amazing. She couldn't remember sex quite like it. Anya hadn't had much sex...but enough to know that with Billy, it was ten times better than her previous encounters.

He just knew exactly where to put his hands, where to touch her, when to slow down and when to pick up the pace... Anya realised she was blushing in her own kitchen and shook herself. She did not need to start feeling lusty for the boy next door with Gemma sat in the living room.

The phone started to ring, startling her slightly. Placing the bowl of chips down, Anya walked over to the ringing phone on the hallway stand. She twisted the cord between her fingers as she spoke. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello? Can I help you?"

There was a noise...it sounded like...breathing...

"Who is this?" Anya asked in a sharper tone, wondering if it was kids playing a prank.

"Why do I keep seeing you?" It was a girl's voice. A young girl, who sounded barely 12 years old. Anya felt her palms start to sweat, her heart beat so loud she could hear it in her eardrums.

"What? Who...who is this?"

"Did you lose your papa?"

Anya's eyes widened. "Yes...please, tell me who you are...?"

"You can find me. You just have to look with your mind."

"What do you mean? Hello? Hello!?" Anya cried desperately into the speaker, but to no avail. The line was dead. She punched in the call back code but the error tone was the only answer she received.

Leaning against the wall, she took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. She now had a thousand more questions and no answers, the answers she desired getting further and further away. Anya felt like she was in a dream, the type that would have you running and running yet you never seemed to get anywhere.

"Anya, are you ok?" Gemma voiced in concern, coming out into the hallway.

"Oh...yeah, just stupid kids," Anya said as she straightened up, suddenly feeling a headache pulse in her brain. "Actually...I don't feel too great. Do you mind if we call a rain check? I think I need to go to bed,"

Gemma nodded. "Oh sure, we can do this another night. Are you sure you are ok? This isn't...about Billy, is it?"

"No. For once, it's not Billy. I just don't feel too good is all,"

"Well, make sure you get some rest then. We need you all better for Tina's party,"

Anya gave a deep sigh. "I already told Billy I'm not going,"

"Well, I'm not Billy. And I say you're coming," Gemma said in a bossy like tone, though there was a smile on her lips. "Tina can shove off,"

"OK, alright. I cave." Anya burst out, anything to shut everyone up about the ridiculous party. "But I am not dressing up."

Gemma just chuckled mischievously, giving Anya a warm parting hug before she left, closing the door quietly behind her. Anya heard the hum of Gemma's engine before the car pulled from the driveway, the lights flashing through the front window.

Anya immediately pulled on her boots and coat. She grabbed a flashlight, striding to the back door with purpose. Bracken looked up at her hopefully, tail wagging in anticipation. "Sorry doggo, not this time," Anya muttered, giving Bracken a pat on the head before she left the house quickly.

She had someone to find.

...

12. Chapter 12

Stranger Love

Chapter Twelve: Eleven

12 Years Earlier

Patricia Hammond marched into the Hawkins Laboratory with purposeful strides. She received no attention from any of the white coated staff, who were all milling around holding folders of research or steaming mugs of coffee.

She reached Dr Brenner's office and rapped on the door. It took him no less than a second to answer 'come in' like he did every single time she visited this place. It was as if he knew when she was going to show up, even when she hadn't informed him.

He was sat behind his desk, brow furrowed. His silver-grey hair brushed back over his head to disguise an ever-growing bald patch – a strong cologne wafting from his skin as if he were trying to mask another uglier smell.

Pushing a lock of curly ebony hair behind her ear, the blue eyed woman stared directly into his calculating gaze. "I want my daughter back."

He half smiled, tilting his head to the side patronisingly. "She isn't ready,"

"I don't care. She's been in here long enough! You said it was only a trial – that she would only need to be here for a few months. It's been over six months and you still have nothing to show for it," Patricia pulled out the paperwork she had signed previously, 'MKUltra' written in large red letters at the top. "It says right here in this paragraph that I have the right remove her from the programme whenever I see fit,"

"Yes. Yes, you are quite right. However, if you look further on within the contract, it also states that if I deem your daughter a danger to

herself or the general public, she must remain here until that is no longer the case," Dr Brenner almost appeared smug, his demeanour the polar opposite of how he had acted when she had first discovered him. Patricia now realised the monster she had given her only child to. He was cold, cruel and unrelenting. Stopping at nothing to achieve his sick and twisted goals.

He stood from his seat, fiddling with his tie. "Your daughter has displayed some remarkable talents. It would be a shame to waist the opportunity – therefor, I am willing to offer you and your husband a large sum of money to allow her continued residence within the lab,"

Patricia shook her head in disbelief. "You don't get it, do you? I brought Anya here for you to fix her! So, she could lead a normal, happy life! I will not allow her to grow up here like some lab rat,"

"There is no fixing what Anya has, she will never be truly rid of her gifts."

"Dr Brenner, you will do everything you can for my daughter, tonight. And once you've finished, you will allow me to take her home, and you will never bother me, or my family, ever again," Patricia said lowly, her voice dangerous.

"I don't believe you are in any position to bargain with me, Mrs Hammond," He warned.

"No? Right. May I ask you a question? Do you truly trust every employee you have working in this laboratory? Do you honestly believe they are all loyal to you?" She ran her manicured fingers over his desk, leaning back into her chair. "Because you have no idea of the things I have on you. I mean, kidnapping? Abduction of babies and children? Anya may have been above board, but I know many of the kids you work on are not."

Dr Brenner's mouth twitched. "You are a foolish, naïve woman. You have no idea the extent I will go to keep my research going,"

"Oh, I know the exact extent you will go to. Unless you are willing to kill every human being in Hawkins, hell, the world, you will never be sure who I have given the information to. So, I suggest you do as I

ask, and let me take my daughter home,"

"I underestimated you, Patricia." Dr Brenner almost seemed impressed, though the way his fists were clenched suggested he was also very angry. Patricia had no fear of his fury. She had made extensive arrangements with her husband and a few select others – if anything were to happen to her, they knew what to do. Her only goal was to save her daughter and give her a good life, one where she knew nothing of the suffering they had all been through.

"Most people do." She replied easily.

"But you know as well as I do how dangerous Anya is. I believe you are making a mistake, a grave one,"

"And I believe you are wasting time. Do whatever it is that you need to do, only make sure she remembers nothing, nothing at all." Patricia stood, her long legs even longer in her black heels. Dr Brenner noticed, his eyes travelling up the young woman's body before finding her eyes.

"As you wish, Patricia."

...

Present Day

A few twigs crunched beneath Anya's boots. Unseen by herself, she jumped in fright at the sound, feeling decidedly foolish afterwards.

Beginning to question her own motives, Anya continued her trek through the trees. What she was looking for was anyone's guess. For some unknown reason, her feet were taking her into the darkness, her torch light filtering into the chilly night air.

Walking for what seemed like an age, Anya finally saw a few lights dotted through the tall trees. She squinted in the dark, a small log cabin coming into view as the forest cleared. The cabin was occupied, there was no doubt about it. She could hear what sounded like a TV and the roar of laughter from a sitcom or something of that ilk.

Daring to move closer she decided to try and peek through a window.

Before she could even move more than an inch, she heard the tread of footfall behind her. Anya whipped around quickly, her torchlight meeting the blank face of a young girl.

The same young girl who had been plaguing Anya's dreams; the one who she'd spoken to on the phone. The curly haired youth stood before her, taller than she would have expected, wearing a shirt two sizes too big for her and baggy jeans.

"You found me." The girl uttered.

Anya felt her heart skip a beat. "Yes..."

"We have to talk somewhere else," With that, the girl turned on her heel and marched back into the trees. Anya followed her swiftly, unwilling to let this girl out of her sights. The pair walked for a further ten minutes in silence, until they reached another clearing. The moon shone down on the girls like a beacon of silver light, illuminating the forest in an ethereal glow.

"What is your name?" Anya asked.

"El. What is yours?"

"Anya,"

"I have seen you many times in my dream circle...who are you?" El said curiously, her big brown eyes wide innocently. Anya did not believe it for a second. This girl may appear as fragile as a baby bird, but she knew there was more to her than what she was portraying.

"Dream circle?"

"You have a dream circle too. That's why we have been seeing each other,"

"Oh..." Anya ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know why, El. I don't know why I can see you, how I found you just now..."

"Your papa died, didn't he?" El said, her eyes saddening.

"Yes...he was shot. I guess I just want to know why,"

"I can tell you why,"

Anya stared at the young girl eagerly. "You can?"

"But first...I need you to help me,"

"What do you need?"

El seemed taken aback. "You will help me?"

"Of course. I want to know, El. I want to know the truth, so if helping means I get the truth, then I will do anything." Anya said sincerely, touching the younger girl's shoulder. Both gasped as the contact caused a sharp surge in their minds, suddenly propelling them into a dark place. Anya stared around in shock. There was water underfoot, the liquid black as the place around them, rippling beneath their feet.

As soon as they had entered that place, they were tugged back out of it. Taking much needed gulps of air, Anya used a tree to support herself, her brain spinning.

"It feels strange at first, but you get used to it," El voiced, seemingly unperturbed by the whole ordeal.

"I've been to that place before," Anya breathed.

"I know you have. Not everyone can go there, not everyone can see. You must be like me," El put a hand over her heart.

"Like you?"

"Watch." El stood still, her eyes turning almost black. The girl lifted her hand into the air, as if she were trying to pull something with an invisible force. Suddenly, droplets of water began rising from the ground. From the leaves, the branches, the trees. Leftover rainwater from the previous day's shower. Anya stared around her as the droplets hung into the air as if hanging from wires, glistening in the moonlight.

El dropped her small hand. The droplets fell simultaneously, some falling onto Anya's hair and skin, yet she was not at all disgruntled. "How can I be like you? I can't do anything like that! How did you..."

how did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just can," The curly haired girl shrugged. "Maybe you have forgotten?"

"Maybe..." Anya continued to lean on the rough trunk of the pine tree, trying her best to take all of this new information in. El stood before her as if she had been there Anya's entire life – this young girl who seemed so sure of herself, so sure of what she was showing her. She trusted Anya explicitly, and for some unknown reason, Anya trusted El explicitly too. "So...what do you need help with, El?"

"I need you to give me a ride to five-one-five Larrabee. To find my Mama,"

"Yeah... OK. To find your mother." Anya suddenly remembered something. "Shoot. I don't have a car, it got totalled,"

"Get a car, take me to see mama and I will give you answers," El practically demanded, slight impatience in her tone.

"Geeze. You're a little firecracker, aren't you?" Anya sighed. "Fine. When do you want to go?"

"You will know when," The younger girl edged mysteriously back into the forest, towards the small cabin. Anya watched as she disappeared, utterly flummoxed but also feeling hopeful.

Maybe she would finally understand the reasoning behind her father's death, and the strange goings on within Hawkins. El was unusual, for sure, yet Anya knew the girl was the only real key in getting the answers she so desperately wanted.

Now all she had to do was get a car.

13. Chapter 13

Stranger Love

Chapter Thirteen: Hallows Eve

Anya felt her heart racing as she pulled into the garage workshop, unsure as to how well her apology was going to be received.

On the understanding it was she who would have to extend the olive branch to Johnny, she'd come up with a plan to get him talking to her again. On visiting a few second-hand car dealers, Anya had successfully purchased an old, beaten up pickup truck. The colour had been white, apparently, but was now more the colour of the rust that had started eating at it's metal coverings.

Anya wasn't proud, or in any way bothered what her fellow peers might think of the rust bucket – she only needed a set of wheels to get her from A to B.

B being the destination she needed to solve the mystery of her father's murder.

Johnny's Dad had owned the garage since Anya could remember. He was the go to man in Hawkins for car repairs, and Johnny often worked there at weekends for the extra cash. Anya rolled into the workshop slowly, instantly spying Johnny hunched over something at his work station. His lean figure was dressed in blue overalls, splashes of oil and grease littering his bare arms and face.

In another life, in another time, Anya may have fallen for Johnny. He was the type who'd be there forever; the childhood sweetheart, the husband, the father and then the person you grew old with. Anya knew in her gut that Billy wasn't that type – not yet, anyway.

Johnny's eyes caught sight of her as she jumped down from her new truck. She hadn't really thought the height thing through. The pale autumn sunlight filtered over her hair, strands of brown illuminating through the ebony curls.

"Hey Johnny,"

For a moment he just continued to watch her, before he spoke. "Hi,"

"Can we talk?" Anya said hopefully, pulling off her sunglasses and placing them onto her head.

"I guess..."

"Look, I didn't mean for any of that to happen. When you asked me on that date I genuinely wanted to go out with you..." She stepped closer to him, the smell of engine oil hot in her nostrils. "I never meant to string you along and I certainly didn't want to hurt you,"

Johnny breathed heavily through his nose, the car part he was working on clunking down on the workspace with a thud. He rubbed the back of his neck, managing to get even more oil onto his skin. "Anya...I've known you my whole life...I know you didn't want to hurt me. I guess...I guess that guy just gets under my skin, you know? I wanted to talk to you, I really did, but he always seems to be around you."

"I don't want this to be about Billy. I want it to be about me and you! Even if we aren't going to date, can we at least go back to being friends? I would hate to lose you," Anya gave him a pleading look.

"Well, when you look at me like that, how can I say no?" Johnny sighed, a small, crooked smile on his lips. "Can you tell me where on earth you got this heap of junk?" He gestured to her pickup, looking very sorry for itself in the middle of the garage.

Anya chuckled, a weight lifting itself from her heart. "Darryl's Dealers,"

"You mean junkyard?"

"Hey! It may be a bit...old...but it has character! It was all I could afford," Anya laughed, the pair of them giggling before falling into silence again. She looked up at him with warm eyes, giving him a slight nudge with her elbow. "Thanks for forgiving me,"

"I forgive you. But don't ask me to forgive Hargrove. You don't want

this to be about him, I get that, but Anya...he is no good for you. He is bad news through and through,"

"I know." Anya felt tears burning in her eyes. "I know...what is wrong with me?"

Johnny lifted her chin with his hand, forcing her to look at him. "Nothing. There is nothing wrong with you, don't you ever let him make you believe that,"

A light tremor in her hands alerted her to his proximity, and for once when she looked up at him, she felt her heart fluttering like the beating of a bird's wing. Her pulse became rapid, breathe quickened and she started to wonder what it would be like to kiss him.

Anya drew back quickly, praying to God she wasn't blushing. This was all kinds of wrong! When did she become this way? One moment she was single and keeping her head down, and now here she was, sleeping with the resident bad boy and developing feelings for the kind, sweet boy in front of her.

If this was adolescence, she really wanted no part of it.

"I better get going," She announced a little too loudly, her voice cracking slightly. Johnny cleared his throat, his cheeks slightly reddened.

"Will I see you at Tina's party tomorrow night?" He stammered.

Anya had totally forgotten about the party. With everything else going on, a Halloween party seemed mighty trivial. "I erm...I don't know. Maybe,"

"Cool. Well, I guess I will see you there, maybe?"

"Yeah," Anya jumped into the truck.

"Oh, and Anya, when that thing starts to choke, you know where I am," Johnny grinned smugly, shaking his head as she held up her middle finger at him before the engine choked to life.

...

The music was pulsing and the air smelt of alcohol and sweat.

Anya stood amongst the fray of students, all too eager to get flat faced drunk. She ignored the glares she received from Tina, ignored the pulse of pain in her cranium from the loud music and the beer. Her mind was elsewhere.

Johnny continually glanced her way – having given up trying to get her to dance. He was dressed as Dracula, with hilariously looking dollar store fangs and fake blood dripping down his chin. Gemma had opted to go as Eartha Kitt, one of her favourite bombshells from the 1950's. Her gold dress hugged her curves, her large black feather bower almost consuming her entirely. She sported large, round leopard print earrings and a smooth flawless up do accentuated by her hairs natural waves.

Due to the last minute of Anya's costume situation, they'd come up with something simple. Wearing a grey, oversized jumper, pink woolly leg warmers and leaving her hair to do it's thing – most inhabitants of the party rightly guessed she was Alex Owens from Flashdance.

Her small black kitten heels completed the outfit nicely, though Anya had no intention of channelling her character's love for dancing at this moment in time. She rather hoped she could slip away soon, still on high alert for a sign from El. The last thing she wanted was to be drunk when El needed her, because Anya needed El just as much.

There was a rather loud ruckus from outside, before Billy Hargrove and his followers burst into the room, all harped up on adrenaline and testosterone. Anya followed him with her eyes, taking in his form. He wore those god damn hot tight jeans, the kind that got her blood boiling. His shirt was missing, so his abs were on display for all females to see, his arms covered by his black leather jacket.

He made his way through the crowds, stopping in front of Steve. They exchanged heated words, Steve looking exasperated and Nancy walking away in pursuit of the kitchen.

"Hey Anya," A voice besides her chirped. She tore her gaze away from Billy, who hadn't seemed to notice her yet. The voice belonged to

Amy, who was looking at her with a worried expression. "Are you ok?"

Amy was pretty in that 'girl next door' kind of way. She had large, inset eyes framed with thick dark lashes. Her hair was long, blond and wavy tonight. She wore a red dress that met the floor, with a gold belt wrapped around her waist. The sleeves were long and almost engulfed her hands, and she had placed a golden headband across her forehead.

"Princess Buttercup, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Anya said as she curtsied.

"I'm so glad you know who I am. Some of these kids have no taste in movies, I mean who hasn't seen the Princess Bride?" Amy deadpanned, rolling her eyes. "Are you alright? You seem kind of sad tonight,"

"Oh, yeah I'm fine,"

"Are you sure? I know it's been hard for you, since...well, since your Dad..."

Anya winced openly. She only ever talked about her Dad with either her Mom or Gemma, it wasn't a subject she was comfortable discussing otherwise. "No, it's not...it's not that. I guess I'm just not feeling in the party mood tonight, you know?"

"I'm sorry Anya! I shouldn't have mentioned it. I am so stupid sometimes," Amy chastised herself, her cheeks flushed red from embarrassment.

"Amy, don't worry. It's honestly fine, you are just being a good friend. I appreciate that," Anya smiled, not having the heart to be annoyed at the sweet girl standing in front of her.

"There was something else, actually,"

Anya brushed a stray piece of hair from her face, wondering what on earth Amy could have to tell her. "What is it?"

"I overheard the boys talking the other day...about you. So, they were

discussing...argh, ok, you know how boys are, right? They were discussing who they would like to fuck, out of the girls... 'in order'..." Amy drawled this out with another eye roll, which Anya mimicked. "I think it was Tommy H, Harry...well it was a few of them anyway. Your name came up and Harry started talking explicitly about you, long story short, Billy came out of nowhere and started punching him. I mean he really went for him! That's why Harry isn't here tonight, apparently his face is so swollen he can hardly see."

"How did I not hear about this?" Anya demanded.

"It happened after school at Basketball practice. I was there to meet Dan,"

"Shit."

"Is there...something going on, between you and Billy?"

Anya leant her head back against the wall, her mind whirling. Part of her was flattered, of course she was. She could defend herself, but any woman who wasn't a little bit over the moon about a guy protecting their honour was kidding themselves. In Billy's sick and twisted way, what he'd done was sweet.

But also, violent. Anya had never been a violent person and never wanted to be either – deep down, however, she felt differently. Like there was a part of her that loved it, that craved for it. Did she have a darker side, a side even she didn't know about?

"If I said no, would you believe me?" Anya replied.

"Probably not. Just...be careful with that one. He's a bit unstable," Amy trained her eyes over to the boy in question, who was creating chaos in the kitchen as per usual.

"Yeah, people keep telling me that,"

"It's because you have a lot of people who care about you, not a bad thing though," The blond tipped some of her beer into Anya's glass with a glint in her eyes. "You look like you need this more than me,"

Anya's mouth curved into a small smile as Dan, Amy's boyfriend,

appeared next to them. He was dressed as Westley, wearing an all-black outfit with a mask over his nose and eyes. "Sup Anya!" He roared, obviously a tad worse for wear.

"Hey Dan, nice costume,"

"I know right!" He blurted, before turning to Amy.

"I need another drink!" She yelled at him.

"As you wish!"

Anya chuckled to herself, deciding to leave the couple to it. They were nauseatingly perfect for one another, like Steve and Nancy, and it was beginning to grate at her heart. She could feel Johnny's eyes on her as she pushed her way through the partiers and left through the back door.

The pool sat empty and still, water rippling only slightly in the cool breeze. She could hear the night time creatures creating their symphony of noise, a few rustles in the dark trees alerting the presence of nocturnal creatures.

The quiet became soothing, the fresh air giving her a slight burst of clarity. A weight sat heavily on her heart once more, one that had been elevated only slightly by Johnny's forgiveness. She now needed answers, answers to questions she'd held onto for far too long.

And then, within the darkness, came that screeching she'd heard before.

Otherworldly, it cried out again, louder this time, closer. Anya peered into the forest lining the back yard, frozen to the spot, fear prickling over her skin.

That thing was back. It was there, somewhere, in the blackness. It was too dark to see it.

She felt hot, almost clammy but not the same kind of heat as a fever. It burned more like the flames of a fire, licking at her skin and flooding her with anguish. Anya wanted to flee but she could not even speak, her voice box was locked tight and her throat squeezed

as if a hand was around her windpipe...

"Anya," A hand fell onto her shoulder. Anya jumped, finally broken from her stupor. She spun around to face the owner of the voice like a bat out of hell.

"Jesus!" Billy exclaimed, staring down at her as if she'd just sprouted an extra head before his eyes. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I...did you see it?" She asked frantically, her eyes now scanning the tree line again.

"See it? See what?"

"That thing, that alien thing was here again!"

One of Billy's eyebrows twitched. "Are you insane?" he suddenly reached out and touched her face. "You're like, a million degrees Anya, are you sick?"

She put her own hand on her forehead. Her skin was indeed extremely hot, but she didn't feel warm in the slightest. "No, I feel fine,"

"Then stop talking crazy! Whatever it is you think you're seeing is probably your over active imagination, alright?"

"You don't believe me." Anya backed away from him. "Whatever. Maybe I am going crazy." She marched over to the pool, squatting down to splash the cool water over her face. As soon as her hand touched the water, it started to bubble. Steam began to rise from it as if it were evaporating, the whole surface of the water churning as if it were...boiling.

"What the actual fuck!?" Billy exclaimed, slack jawed.

"I need to go." Anya murmured, her eyes stinging with tears. What the hell was going on? Her brain was in overload and she was starting to panic. Had the pool done that purely out of coincidence? Maybe the heater was set too high? As she looked back, she realised all the water had disappeared completely, and the pool now stood empty.

She started to run.

"Anya! Anya! Wait!" Billy was running after her, she could hear his footsteps. Her truck wasn't too far down the long road, it wouldn't take her long to find it.

Billy's hand caught the top of her arm, halting her in her tracks. He pulled her around to face him, her hands resting on his chest. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Billy just let me go," Anya protested, trying to get out of his vice like hold.

"No! Not until you tell me what is going on,"

"It's nothing, I swear. I just had too much to drink,"

"I know that's a lie, you've barely touched a drop of alcohol all night," His hands loosened their hold as she took a few big gulps of air, her lungs burning. "Just calm your shit woman,"

"Don't call me woman." Anya grumbled, feeling his warm, soft and chiselled skin beneath her palms. He smelt of cologne, alcohol and cigarettes. They all mixed together to make one unique scent that was just his.

Without thinking, she let out a sigh, resting her head against his chest. The loud beating of his strong heart lulled her into a semi state of bliss, her body instantly relaxing from his touch.

For a moment he remained still, his body going slightly rigid. Thinking he was going to push her away, Anya was surprised when she felt his hands clasped her gently. One wound into her hair, whilst the other rested around her waist. She felt his chin settle on the top of her head.

For a while, this is where they remained. Until eventually, Anya inclined her head backwards, wanting nothing more than to go home and face plant her bed. "I need to go."

Billy blinked at her. "How? You don't even have a car,"

"I bought a truck,"

"Course you fucking did," He drawled, his demeanour not one of smugness, but of almost frank concern. "Look... Jesus, Anya, I wanted to ask you something, before all that...crazy shit just happened,"

Anya gave him an expectant look. He flushed under her gaze, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "This isn't something I normally do, alright? I just...wanted to ask you out. On a date."

"A date? You and me. You want to go out on a date?" She was so taken aback her eyes widened considerably. This was one hell of a night.

"Look, you don't have to make a big deal outta this, you know? It's just a stupid date,"

"I...I'm just surprised...that's all." She realised right then and there, that she had Billy Hargrove on strings. He was waiting impatiently for her answer, and Anya had half a mind to make him suffer.

Half a mind.

The other half, the silly, teenager half, was doing a little dance with pink love hearts instead of eyes. "Ok. Yeah, a date sounds...good,"

"I'm picking where we're fucking going, none of this bullshit movie or pizza crap," Billy said gruffly, though there was a spark in his eyes from her response.

"Whatever you say," Anya slipped out of his hold, gesturing to her truck. "This is me."

Billy took one look at the old thing and burst into laughter. He laughed so hard that he bent over, the sound so clear and pure it almost hurt Anya's ears to hear it. "Shut up! It's vintage!"

"It's a fucking pile of shit!" Billy exclaimed as he barked with more hilarity. She huffed, mildly offended – she knew deep down he was right, but she would be damned if she ever told him that. Opening the door quickly, Anya grimaced as it creaked loudly, earning more merriment from Billy. Before she could hop in, he pulled her flush against him, planting a long, hard kiss on her lips.

"We could christen your 'new' truck if you like?" He said smoothly, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. Anya gave him a quick shove, jumping up into the seat and starting the engine.

"Maybe next time Hargrove," She called, leaving him standing on the roadside, watching her go.

...

14. Chapter 14

Stranger Love

Chapter Fourteen: Five Fifteen Larrabee

The curtains were on fire.

Anya watched as the unfamiliar, heavy grey material succumbed to the flames. They licked and swirled through the air, each singing a lullaby into her mind.

She liked them. They were whispering sweet things, making her want to hear more. The smoke did not affect her lungs, nor did the heat burn her skin. She reached out, placing her hand within the blue and orange, the inferno feeling cool beneath her touch.

"Anya!" A voice cried, it was the distant screams of her mother. "Anya!"

Anya could not turn around, nor could she will herself to. The fire was too tempting and she revelled in it...

"Anya! Sweetie, it's ok..."

Her eyes flickered open. Peering down at her with a look of deep concern on her face was her Mom, dark hair unravelled and messy around her cheeks. "Mom?"

"How are you feeling?" Patricia placed a cold flannel over Anya's forehead.

"What do you mean?" Anya frowned, sitting up despite her Mom's protest. "What's going on?"

"You came home from the party last night with a terrible fever. I put you into bed, you've been tossing and turning all night. I thought I might have to call an ambulance!" Patricia handed her a glass of water. "Drink that and lie back down, you are not going to school today,"

"But I feel fine, honestly! I was just having bad dreams," Anya gulped down the liquid in record time, not realising until then how thirsty she was. "They were strange...did we ever have dark grey curtains?"

Her Mom paused, not looking her in the eye as she fumbled with some items on Anya's bedside table. "Er...not that I remember,"

"Well...I was dreaming about grey curtains and they were on fire. It was so real Mom, like I was really there," Anya pushed her hair back from her face. "And I was touching the fire, like with my bare hands! It was completely insane,"

"You had a really high temperature, it was probably because of that," Patricia handed her some paracetamol. "Here, take this,"

"It's a bit weird, me having dreams about fire and my temperature is sky high?"

"I suppose," Patricia mumbled, the older woman grabbing a few items of clothing strewn on the floor. "Now take those and get some rest. I will call school and let them know you can't come in,"

"Mom, they know Tina had a party last night. They'll think it's because I'm hungover," Anya protested, in no mood to lie in bed all day and not feeling ill in the slightest. She hadn't even known her temperature was so high!

"I don't care! You need to rest!"

"But-"

"No buts Anya! You're not going to school and that's final." Her Mom gave her one of those 'do not mess with me right now' looks, putting the neatly folded clothes into Anya's cupboard before leaving her bedroom with the snap of the door.

Anya huffed, folding her arms across her chest and glaring at the spot her Mom had just been standing in. What was her Mom's problem? Why was she so determined to keep Anya out of school when she felt perfectly fine? It was ridiculous.

Suddenly she could hear the distinct voice of Billy, yelling about

something. Anya flung her legs over the mattress and hurried to the window, hiding behind the thin drapes to get a look. Billy was stalking over to his car angrily, Maxine shuffling along beside him with her head down.

"- why do you even go to school, huh? It's a waste of time for a delinquent like you!" Billy's father roared from front porch, his voice so loud Anya reckoned the whole street was going to hear. "I give you two years before you're in jail!"

"That's enough Neil," Susan's tiny squeak was just about audible, the woman looked decidedly embarrassed and completely mortified.

"No, it's not enough! He lives under my roof, eats my food, racks up the energy bills and does fuck all-in return!" The man roared, his face red.

"I'm going to school!" Billy responded, quite mildly for him.

"How about I sell that ridiculous car of yours?!"

"Then how would you be able to get rid of me!"

Neil was about to walk over to his son, most likely with the intent to put fists on him. Susan, however, stood before her husband, placing a small hand on his chest. "Billy, Max, go to school now. We will see you at dinner," She looked up at Neil. "Let's go inside now, hey?"

And that was that. The neighbourhood became at peace again, only interrupted by the roar of Billy's engine. Anya was impressed by how Susan handled the situation – she'd probably done it many times before. The woman clearly loved her husband, though what she saw in him Anya had absolutely no idea.

She headed back towards her bed, deciding maybe a little more shut eye wouldn't be so bad, when a sudden pain radiated through her brain.

Anya gasped, her hands flying to her temples. Her bare feet were wet – she looked down and saw the same, still rippling water as before. What had El called it again? A dream circle? She couldn't remember, the pain in her head making it difficult to think straight.

"I'm sorry it hurts, it always hurts the first few times,"

The voice made Anya start. She whirled around to face El, the curly haired girl as stoic and poised as ever. "What is this?"

"We are connected – our minds are one. We can communicate like this," El paced around Anya, pointing at something in the distance. Anya squinted into the darkness. There was an old house stood within the inky black water, too far for her to see much detail, close enough for her to see it was about ready to fall apart.

"It's time to go," The young girl looked to Anya once more.

"OK." Anya nodded, determination flooding through her very bones. "Let's do this,"

"I will be waiting. You will know where to find me,"

Anya felt the pain in her head fizzle to a dull ache as she felt herself thrust back into her bedroom. The world span on its axis for a moment, her hand falling to her bed for support. Within minutes, she was flinging clothes into her backpack.

She didn't know how long she or El were going to be, or where they would end up. Reaching underneath her bed, Anya pulled out the envelope of money she'd stashed under the bed for just this occasion. Stuffing it into the pocket of her pack, she panicked when her mother's footsteps began to ascend the stairs.

Sliding the pack under her covers, Anya jumped in and curled up, deciding the best course of action was to pretend to be asleep. Patricia came into her room quietly, and Anya felt the bed dip with her weight as she sat next to her daughter.

She couldn't see her Mom's face, but somehow knew that the older woman was crying. Patricia gently stroked Anya's hair. The gesture had once soothed Anya, but now, now it felt strange.

"I'm so sorry...so, so sorry..." Her Mom muttered through gulps. "All of this is my fault..."

What on earth did Patricia mean by that?

Anya struggled with the urge to question her mother – her curiosity almost getting the better of her. Patricia stayed for a while longer, before she leant down and kissed Anya on the cheek. After what seemed like an age, she finally left, and Anya jumped up almost immediately.

'Mom,

Please don't worry. I have to go away for a while, and I don't know how long I will be. There is just something that I need to do – I need answers, and I am not going to get them in Hawkins.

I will come back. I promise.

I love you,

Anya.'

She wrote the note hurriedly, folding the manila paper into two and setting it atop her bed covers. Now dressed in a pair of light denim jeans and a baggy jumper, she slipped on her white sneakers and pushed open her bedroom window.

It wasn't exactly the first time Anya had shimmied down across the roof of the front porch to escape the house. At age 15, she'd been besotted by an older boy from school and spent many a night in his car doing things no fifteen-year-old should have been doing.

Now though, her cause was different. This was about answers, about her Dad. She had to know why he'd been murdered, and El was the only one who seemed to be able to tell her. She had a connection to the girl that neither one could explain – a shared bond from some past traumatic experience.

Anya's feet hit the ground and she full pelt sprinted towards her truck, her mother's form dotting about the front room. She took one last look at her Mom, too busy cleaning to have noticed, before she jumped up in the vehicle and roared the engine to life.

El was waiting for her at the crossroads, where Hawkins ended. The young girl wasted no time, throwing open the door and getting inside quickly.

"Hi,"

"Hey," Anya answered. "You know the way?"

"Yes. So do you,"

This was in fact, true. Anya knew exactly where they were going, as if a map had been drawn into her mind. "Let's go find your Mama,"

...

15. Chapter 15

Stranger Love

Chapter Fifteen – Five Fifteen Larrabee

Anya smoked a cigarette leisurely as she waited for El to finish in the rest room.

She leant against her truck, basking in the cool winter sunlight. The gas station sat lonely along the highway, hidden mostly behind dense trees and foliage. It was a wonder anyone knew it existed – if it wasn't for the poorly written sign on the roadside.

It was so quiet, she could hear the breeze ripple through the treetops. The browning leaves fell like snow around her, littering the floor with yellows, reds and fawn. They would soon die, fade away and rot, succumbing to the cold that would soon be biting its way through Indiana.

A man walked past her, probably in his late 50's, his boots clunking over the uneven ground. He paused to look at Anya, who merely gave him a weak smile before he stalked off into the store. She half panicked, her mind suddenly reeling with ideas of 'missing teenager' posters with her face plastered onto them. Then she realised quite quickly this was idiotic, she'd only been missing for a few hours. There was no doubt her mother had gone straight to Hopper about her disappearance, so it was imperative that she and El kept moving.

Said El appeared out of the restroom, her footsteps light as she re-joined Anya.

"Why do you smoke?" The curly haired girl asked. She did not look judgmental, just curious.

Anya shrugged. "Habit, I guess. It relieves stress, I started after I lost my Dad...just haven't been able to stop,"

"Hopper says smoking is bad for you,"

"He's right,"

"He thinks he's my Dad. He isn't. He is a liar," El clenched her fists, anger in her hazel brown eyes.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure what went on between you two but, Hopper means well...most of the time," Anya flicked her cigarette butt away, her actions reminding her acutely of Billy.

El mimicked Anya as she paced to the door of her vehicle, both girls sliding in at the same time. "I am still angry with him. He lied about mama...who knows what else he lied about,"

"You know, sometimes adults think they are doing a good thing by keeping things from us, I am not sure if they are right," Anya sped off into the road, the truck bouncing over potholes.

"I agree," El leant back in the seat, looking exhausted.

"Why don't you sleep? We still have about an hour to go,"

The younger girl seemed to agree, for she closed her eyes and was snoring softly within a few minutes. Anya sighed, her mind racing at a hundred miles an hour. She couldn't stop thinking about her Mom, the way she'd been crying, apologising...for something Anya had no idea about. It wasn't sitting well with her, nor was the other reason her mind reeled.

Billy. She couldn't shake him. His voice, his smell, everything about him revolved around her brain. She could still feel his kiss, hear his strong heartbeat in her ear as he held her in his arms.

She had a serious case of puppy love for that boy.

The following hour seemed to fly by, and before she knew it, she was waking up a still snoozing El. "Hey, El, we're here,"

The girl opened her eyes and blinked a few times, for a moment looking confused as to where she was. Recognition hit her face as she saw the mailbox they were driving past. "Five – Fifteen Larrabee,"

"The very one," Anya said, apprehension filling her gut. She had no idea who they were about to meet, or what they were walking into. "I hope you know what you're doing, because I sure as hell don't,"

El said nothing, merely watched as the house they'd both seen in that strange place emerge from the trees. The front yard was dappled in sunlight, leading to a front porch that looked in dire need of repair. Various items were scattered around the yard; big piles of firewood stacked high, an old garden hose strung out over the ground, large panels of fencing leaning against the side of the house.

The two girls jumped down from the truck, El wasting no time in striding forwards to the front door. She banged on it three times, receiving no reply.

"I hope someone's in," Anya murmured, walking over to one of the windows and peeking through. She couldn't see anyone, and was doubtful someone was in there until a woman started yelling.

"I don't want what you're selling!" The lady roared.

El clearly did not appreciate this response, and continued to pound on the door. The woman who had just yelled opened the door in annoyance, the latch impeding entrance to the house.

"Look, I don't want your thin mints, alright kid?"

"Thin mints?" El asked. The look on her face would have been funny, if not for the current circumstance they were in.

Anya gave a short sigh. "Listen lady-"

"Whatever you kids are selling, I ain't buying, ok?" The curly haired woman with dark eyes then proceeded to slam the door with a loud snap.

"Well that went well." Anya quipped, her heart sinking. She hadn't expected the welcome wagon, but that was just plain rude.

"Give me a second," El said quietly, standing behind the door with a look of immense concentration on her face. Anya began to worry, hoping she wasn't planning on blowing the door off its hinges. There was a tiny 'clicking' sound, which Anya presumed was the latch sliding out, before the front door slowly creaked open.

The lady who had very quickly dismissed the pair of, turned to face

the threshold, mouth ajar.

"I want to see Mama." El said, albeit in quite an intimidating voice for one so young.

Anya stepped forwards, only just noticing the blood dripping from El's nose. "Hi, erm, yeah, sorry about that but you weren't going to let us in otherwise. My name's Anya, this is-"

"Jane. My name is Jane," El cut in, ignoring Anya's surprised glance.

The lady in the hallway put a hand over her mouth as she gasped. "I don't believe it..."

"Where is Mama?" El demanded impatiently.

"My name is Becky Ives...I am your Aunty. Please...follow me, your Mama is this way," Becky, who had short, curly brown hair, gestured them to follow her. She had a tired face, bags beneath her eyes and a look that suggested she'd had a tough life. She wore a white shirt over a plain black top, her jeans faded and old looking.

The house itself seemed relatively normal. Decorated with neutral colours, random household items placed on shelves and under tables. The sound of a TV echoed through the hallway, and Anya held her breath.

Becky stopped at the doorway leading to the sitting room. She had a sad, sorrowful look on her face, one that Anya did not like at all. She knew El was going to turn that corner, to see her mother for the first time, regardless of what anyone said...but she couldn't help the horrible feeling creeping up her spine.

El entered the front room just before Anya. The TV continued to blare loudly, placed in front of a lady who was seated in a rocking chair. Her brown eyes were fixed on the television, face gaunt and pale. She had dark blond hair that had thinned with age and stress, pulled back into a loose ponytail. As she rocked her chair, back and forth, she muttered various words that made little to no sense, seemingly lost in her own world of madness.

"Mama...can you hear me?" El breathed, stopping in front of her

Mother and sinking down to her knees.

"How long as she been like this?" Anya asked Becky sadly, who was watching intently.

"A very long time," the woman replied, tears running down her cheeks.

El turned to the pair of them, her eyes wide. "What's wrong with mama?"

...

Anya felt slightly like an intruder.

El was coming to terms with the fact that her biological mother was mentally ill, and would probably never recover. It felt like the moment should be private, between El and her Aunty. They both sat at the kitchen table, talking, crying, whilst Anya hung back, listening, but not involving herself.

Teresa Ives, the lady in the rocking chair, was still muttering to herself. Anya had never seen anyone like that before. It was unsettling, and saddening. Poor El would never truly know her mother – and that was terribly cruel for anyone to endure.

After a while El decided it was time to delve into her mother's mind.

"Anya, you can help me," She said, holding out a cloth for Anya to use over her eyes. Anya was slightly apprehensive – she had limited knowledge when it came to the dream circle. As if sensing her unease, El took her hand.

The pair of them sat cross legged in front of Teresa. A strong, pulling sensation started to tug harshly at Anya's temples. She grimaced at the feeling and shuddered at the cold shiver that ran down her spine.

The water seemed to be blacker than before. Anya could see El next to her, Teresa not far away in her rocking chair. A woman in distress rushed past, wearing a yellow, floral patterned dress that was covered in blood from the waist down. It was Teresa, a heavily pregnant, bleeding Teresa.

"Mama! Mama!" El was crying out, dashing to her mother's side as she fell into the inky water. Anya couldn't move, her mind whirling as the scene changed and suddenly they were no longer in the dark place. She could see faces, blurry faces, above her. They were all rushing along a corridor, speaking soothing words as Anya felt agonising pain shooting through her abdomen. Several wore surgeon scrubs and she could make out Becky's face...

And then she saw him.

A man, with piercing eyes and a cold, cruel look on his face.

She knew him, she had seen him before. Teresa's thoughts bombarded Anya like a brick to the face and she could feel the absolute panic spreading into her very soul. She could feel a metal scalpel slicing cleanly into her stomach, feel her flesh opening like the skin of an orange being peeled slowly. Hot, thick red blood oozed over her skin, the feeling not dissimilar to being burned with scalding water.

Anya wanted to scream but she couldn't.

The only respite came when she heard the cries of a babe. There, held in a doctors hands, was a new born baby – it's first little wails like the sound of angels singing a miracle in heaven.

Then a mask was lowered to her face, and the world turned black.

The agony had ceased, finally. Teresa's memories switched, and now the agony was not physical at all. They were telling her the babe was dead, that she had not been breathing, yet that newborn cry would forever be etched into her skull. The sound played on repeat, over and over. She knew her baby was alive, she knew that man had gotten his hands on her.

Nothing was stronger than the bond between mother and baby, and it had ultimately brought Teresa to her doom. Determined to find her child, she forced her way into Hawkins Lab, firing her gun at anyone who stood in her way. Anya could feel every single shred of her pain as she searched in desperation for Jane...for El.

Teresa burst into a room with a painted rainbow in the doorway. Inside were two children, two girls. One had dark, copper skin, her thick black hair braided down her back. The other was El.

Anya felt the sheer relief flood Teresa's entire body. For a tiny, minuscule second, the woman who had been searching for a child she thought she would never see again was within her grasp. El did not show any recognition for the woman, having never seen her, or even known her mother existed. They were so close to being together again that Anya wanted to yell in anger as Teresa was pulled from the room by two of the scientists working for the lab.

She didn't want to watch – she knew what was coming. Anya could only helplessly witness Teresa as they basically lobotomised her with electric shock therapy.

A flood of images hit both Anya and El's minds. The pattern of Teresa's words became clear, what she said was not just random. It meant everything. It meant that the woman sat in front of them had done everything she could to bring El home, to make her safe...but it had not been enough.

The images were started to go faster and faster. Anya felt her head started to ache, a feeling of nausea hitting her stomach. Without warning, the pair of them were thrown out of the dream circle, both girls gasping in shock at the revelation.

All three women had blood dripping from their noses. Anya took steadying breathes as she came to terms with everything both she and El had just witnessed, still claspig tightly onto the younger girl's hand. El looked understandably upset, her eyes pooling with tears as she stared at her mother. Both Anya and Becky comforted her as best they could, however Anya couldn't shake one thing in particular from her mind.

That man, the one who had been in the hospital, the one who'd done that horrible thing to El's mother.

She remembered him.

16. Chapter 16

Stranger Love

Chapter Sixteen – Revelations

They were rifling through old files. Anya was sat on the floor next to El, both peeling over old newspaper articles, pictures of missing kids, information that may lead them to the child in the rainbow room.

Anya knew El was hiding something from her – and she didn't like it. Being in the dark for so long was beginning to drain her spirit, the more time they spent digging, the less confident Anya felt in her companion. The answer to all her questions were within grasping distance, she could feel it in her bones.

"Hold on – Anya, what is your last name?" Becky, who was also sitting beside the younger girls, asked suddenly.

"Hammond, why?" Anya replied curiously, turning her focus on a piece of paper in Becky's hands. The woman handed her the photocopy, pointing at the picture.

"Is that...you?"

Anya stared at the photograph of her much younger self. She must have only been 4 or 5 when the photo was taken. She had a big, toothless grin on her face, dark hair cut short in a bob. The dress she wore was ridiculously frilly, sleeves so puffy they almost shrouded her face.

She started to read the article quickly.

LOCAL GIRL 'OPTED IN' FOR CLINICAL TRIALS AT HAWKINS LABORATORY

Local Hawkins resident, Anya Hammond, age 4, is the latest in a line of children opted for clinical trials at Hawkins Laboratory. The controversial 'trials' are said to be completely harmless to the children and are only intended to be performed for the 'greater good' of mankind.

Anya Hammond has been the only named child in these trials, whilst any others have chosen to be anonymous. Patricia Hammond, her mother, has refused to speak on the matter, which only further fuels the debate on whether these trials are ethically sound. No Doctor from the labs has chosen to give a statement at this time.

It has been widely speculated that head of the science team, Dr Brenner, has often used inhuman methods during his time working at the lab. His infamous experiments involving chimpanzee's sparked a rage within animal welfare communities, who are now expressing concerns over his treatment of the children. In a latest statement from the Doctor himself, he implied his research would never overshadow the health and welfare of any children in his care.

The article went on further to explain other details of the trials, but Anya had stopped reading. Since when had she been 'opted in' for clinical trials at Hawkins Lab? And why had her Mom never told her about it?

More to the point, why could Anya remember absolutely nothing about it?

"So...I was in Hawkins lab...with this Dr Brenner guy, like you." This wasn't a question, rather a statement. "What does this mean?"

"It means that I was right. You can go into the dream circle, which means you have a power, like me," El looked down at the picture of Anya. "You were taken...by Papa,"

Anya cast the curly haired girl an incredulous glance, about to inquire as to who the hell 'papa' was, when El caught sight of something. She pulled out another article, the title reading **'INDIAN GIRL FROM LONDON, MISSING'**, with a picture of the young girl they'd envisioned earlier staring straight back at them with innocent dark eyes.

"That's her, that's the girl we're looking for," Anya said, momentarily distracted from her previous thoughts. "From the rainbow room."

"We must find her," El held out her hand to Anya. The girl was tenacious there was no doubt about it, though the thought of being

pulled back into the dream circle was enough to incite bile to rise to Anya's throat.

"Ok, just go easy. I'm not so used to this stuff yet,"

They joined hands once again, Anya feeling that familiar tug on her brain as they searched through the dark place once more. It was harder this time, her body was spent and a sharp pain was beginning to throb at her temples. After what felt like hours, she eventually pulled them out by letting go of El's hands.

"Did you find her?" Becky asked as she sat beside them, her eyes widened imploringly.

"No..." Anya shook her head, wiping her nose as hot blood started to pour from her nostril. "El, we need to take a break, I can't keep up with it,"

"But I want to find her," The younger girl said, her tone downcast as she gazed at the picture in her hands.

"You will, but right now I think you both need to get some shut eye," Becky hauled herself to her feet as she looked out of the window. Night time was fast approaching, a surprise to Anya as she hadn't even noticed the sun setting. The sky had turned a luminous spectrum of neon orange, dusky pink and midnight blue. "You can use the spare room,"

The spare room, as it turned out, was in fact a nursery. It seemed even after all those years, Becky hadn't had the heart to do anything with El's room. The cot stood empty against the adjacent wall, with a baby mobile suspended above. There were baby toys, books, even a collection of lullaby records stacked on the shelves.

It was ridiculously sad, to think of the years lost between mother and baby, all because of some crazy scientist who thought he could play god.

Anya gratefully curled up onto the floral patterned armchair, her head still hurting and eyes stinging from keeping them open. She spied El for a moment, lying down on a camper bed as she continued

to stare at the photo of the missing girl.

"Try to rest, El. We're going to find her," Anya said through a yawn, resting her head on a cushion as she closed her eyes.

Sleep found her quickly.

...

"Anya!"

Anya gasped, jolted awake by El who was shaking her shoulders.

"What? What is it? What's wrong?" She asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes.

"We have to go, now!" The younger girl tugged her arms, eyes alert and frantic. Anya wondered what time it was and how much sleep she'd managed to acquire – judging by how tired she felt, it hadn't been much. The curly haired brunette in front of her was practically bouncing up and down on her heels. "Anya, come on!"

"Will you tell me what the problem is?"

"I found her, the girl. I was going to tell Becky but I heard her on the phone, she is trying to reach Hopper!"

"Shit." Anya's attention had been attained. The last thing either of them needed was the police discovering their whereabouts, it was a one way ticket back home. "Let's get out of here,"

The two girls scrambled through the house, Anya grabbing her bag she'd left in the hallway. Becky's voice could be heard – she was still on the phone – so they slipped out of the front door and disappeared into the night.

Anya revved up her truck and they skidded from the driveway.

"Why do adults always do that? They act like they want to help and then they break your trust." El mumbled unhappily, arms folded as she sat next to Anya.

"It's...because they want to help. I don't think Becky wanted to betray us, she just didn't know what else to do," Anya sighed, running a hand through her hair as the edge of sleep finally eased off. "So, where exactly are we headed now?"

El held the picture like a vice in her fingers, casting Anya a sideways glance. "Chicago."

17. Chapter 17

Stranger Love

Chapter Seventeen: Chicago

Anya hadn't been to the windy city since her father died. The streets were rife with activity, even at the lateness of the hour, artificial lights lighting up the entire place. There were people hanging out of bars, women strutting about in seven-inch heels and hair as big as the skyscrapers looming above them. Two guys waltzed past with huge boom boxes balanced on their shoulders, one of them casting Anya a glance of approval and a wink.

El noticed a couple of cops leaning on their police car and she dipped her head. Anya would have laughed at the young girl's obviousness but was stopped short by a man who barged past both she and El. He turned back to them with a sneer, his suit and tie screaming 'business man'.

"Watch where you're going, kids!" He barked. Anya wanted very badly to correct him on that score, but just settled with sticking up her middle finger at him rudely. El sniggered at his retreating back, the pair chuckling to themselves as they meandered through the city.

"Are we close?" Anya asked as they left behind the tall buildings, following a labyrinth of back streets.

"Yes," El responded, all traces of amusement vanished from her expression. The concrete sidewalks were glistening in the street lamps from the rain, a few puddles dotted about in potholes on the road. Anya could see they were heading to a darker part of the city and rolled her eyes. Typical, that this girl was living in some dark abandoned part of Chicago and not some nice pent house in the centre of the city.

It seemed Chicago hadn't the immunity to poverty. As they turned into an alleyway, the two girls were greeted with the sight of a whole community of homelessness. The increasing population and lack of jobs meant there were twice as many people who now had to live on

the streets, mostly through no fault of their own, either.

Benny Hammond, her Dad, had often travelled to the city to help the soup kitchens. He would provide food and water for the many people who had no money even for a loaf of bread. Anya remembered being with her Dad once, all those years ago. Despite all his efforts, life continued to move in circles and there were always more people in need.

El looked slightly frightened so Anya took hold of her hand. A man was screaming about something in a manic voice, his eyes alight with a madness that could only be due to a mental illness of some sort. They both picked up the pace, leaving behind the many folk huddled around fires.

"Why are they like that?" El whispered, as the two walked along a quieter road. Anya scanned the graffiti on the walls, the colours bright and colourful, masking the dull greyness of the area.

"They were just...unlucky, I guess. Some people aren't dealt a good hand," Anya said. "They don't mean any harm,"

"It's not fair, is it Anya?"

"No. It really isn't,"

The young girl halted in her tracks, staring at a warehouse before them. There was a small door with a tiny window that glowed and flickered with light. "Is this it, El? Is this where she is?"

"Yes," El marched forwards determinedly.

"El, wait! We can't just walk in there, we don't even know who else is inside," Anya breathed as she raced to catch up with the kids strides.

"It's ok. I'm not afraid."

"Well, that makes one of us,"

El turned to her as they approached the door. "I will go first, see who is in there. If I have any trouble I can use my powers, they can't hurt me,"

"Alright. But if I hear anything I don't like I'm coming in after you,"

The curly haired girl nodded, opening the door with a loud creak. Anya instantly heard voices sounding from inside, using her foot to keep the door slightly ajar so she could hear what was happening.

"Hello?" El called out.

"Well well, who do we have here?" A man voice sounded. It was an edged, cruel voice, like the sound of a nails scraping a chalkboard. Anya heard a couple more feminine voices, all sounding quite amused by the overalls El sported.

"I'm looking for my sister,"

"Aww! Shirley Temple lost her sister. *So sad,*"

Anya pulled a face behind the door. Who was this jerk? She heard El start to talk about the picture of the missing girl, one of the women letting out a slightly surprised gasp.

"Is that Kali?"

"Kali?" El asked innocently.

"How did you find us? Who else knows you're here?" It was the jerk again.

"No one."

"So, what then? Poof! You just show up like magic with that picture? Who are you?"

The woman spoke up again. "Calm down! She's just a kid,"

"A kid who could get us all killed! If I have to ask you again Shirley, you'll start losing things! Starting with those pretty little locks of yours!"

Uh oh. It was going south quite quickly. Anya flew through the door with a bang, all four occupants jumping in shock at her surprise entrance.

The jerk was at least two heads taller than she and El, with a multi-coloured mohawk that could have easily rivalled Tina's hair height back home. His punk look was completed with silver jewellery, fingerless gloves and tattoos inked in various places over his skin.

Anya's heart raced uncomfortably when she spied a knife in his hand. "Back off! We aren't here to cause any trouble," She said coolly, keeping her shaking voice level as she pushed El behind her.

Mohawk sauntered a bit closer and Anya could see the blades sharp end ghosting her neck. "So, Shirley Temple brought along the prom queen, huh?"

"Axel put away the knife, will you?!" A woman with an afro and dark copper coloured skin pleaded, taking hesitant steps forwards.

"How did you find us?" Axel said, jerking the blade towards Anya as he ignored her.

"We're looking for the girl in the picture, we saw her here," She said as calmly as possible. The tall guy grabbed hold of her forearm tightly, his icy blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Get off me!"

"You are lying prom queen, I wanna know who sent you and I wanna know now!" He thrust the knife closer to Anya and she panicked, her skin prickling all over with an intense heat. Suddenly Axel let out a shriek, pulling his hand away from her arm with a loud curse.

"You – you burnt me!" He hissed. "She freakin' burnt my hand!"

The knife had long since fallen to the ground, but no one was paying it any attention as the jerk stared at her in alarm. Anya watched as he jumped around a bit, nursing his injured hand. "Well...it serves you right for acting like a thug!"

"Listen here-"

"You're a terrible dancer Axel." A low, female voice cut over his response. Anya watched as the woman descended the steps. She had purple in her black hair, one side of it shaved and the rest

backcombed over her scalp. Her skin was a dark tan colour, eyes brown and framed with thick black eye make-up. It was the girl from the picture – only now, she was fully grown and nothing like the innocent little kid with plaits and wide eyes.

"This nutjob just *burnt me*, Kali, you gonna do somethin' or what?" He gestured towards Anya who folded her arms and glowered at him.

"So, we're threatening girls, now are we?" Kalie deadpanned, completely ignoring Axel's frenzied disposition.

"They know about you!"

Another woman stepped forwards. Her hair had been backcombed to within an inch of its life, now frizzy and huge with a blue scarf wrapped around her head loosely. "She had this," The woman handed over the photograph of Kali.

Kali gazed upon it nonchalantly. "Where did you get this?"

"Mama," El replied swiftly.

"Your mother gave this to you?"

"Yeah, in her dream circle."

Axel scoffed. "Dream circle, I think they're both schizos or something," He shook out his injured hand, bending down to scoop up his knife from the floor. Without a glance, El used her powers to whip it from his grasp, the blade settling neatly in her hand.

"Jesus." The woman with dark skin exclaimed.

"We saw you. In the rainbow room," El folded the blade into its sheath, before offering it back to Kali. Her dark eyes swooped over both she and El as she circled them like a leopard would its prey.

"What are your names?"

"Me name is Jane. This is Anya,"

Kali stepped towards El, pushing up her sleeve to reveal the '011'

tattoo on the inside of her wrist. It took but a second for El to do the exact same to Kali, the tattooed number '008' in the same place. The brown eyed girl turned to Anya. "You have one?"

"Er...no..."

"Anya is one of us, but she can't remember." El explained for Anya, who was at a loss for words. Kali's eyes were so familiar, it was starting to hurt her brain. Her skin still felt hot, the heat sweeping over her like a warm desert breeze, and her general lack of sleep was giving her a headache.

She couldn't believe she burnt that Axel guy, even if he was a complete jerk. The last thing she ever wanted was to hurt anyone, unintentionally or otherwise. "I'm here to help El – Jane, and get some answers."

"So...we are sisters then?" Kali said to the two girls.

"Sisters." El agreed, her eyes full of happiness.

"Yeah... I guess we are. Sisters." Anya couldn't really understand the warmth that statement brought to her heart. All three of them had a shared experience within the Hawkins Labs that no one else would ever comprehend. They were bonded for life.

Luckily, her skin had cooled down as they embraced – a bizarre trio of unlikely siblings.

Well...stranger things had happened.

...

"Ok. Anya, I just want you to be absolutely sure that this is what you want," Kali said seriously as all three of the trio sat crossed legged in a small circle. "Because once we do this, there is no going back."

Anya was cautious. The answers to her father's death and her suppressed memories were well within her grasp, now. Kali had the gift of mind manipulation. She could create images in people's brains or bend their thoughts to her will. The nature of her powers would aid the three girls if they were to open the door to Anya's past.

Both Anya and El were refreshed and well rested. Kali had taken them up to her 'bedroom', which was a converted office space. The five misfits had really created a home in the abandoned building and Kali's room even had a large queen-sized bed. Anya had never been more grateful to put her head down on a pillow, sleep finding her very quickly. She awoke with her arm curled over El's waist, the pair having slept a solid 12 hours.

She'd then been introduced properly to the whole gang. There was Dottie, Funshine (he was huge with muscle), Mick and the jerk, Axel. According to Kali, they were all society's rejects, so Anya had to assume each one of them had a tragic backstory. Axel had bandaged up his hand and kept eyeing her with a strange look, as if he were worried she may spontaneously combust at any given moment.

Now, Kali, El and Anya sat in a circle, crossed legged on the floor. They joined hands, El's clasping at Anya's tightly as she waited for her answer.

"Yes. I am sure about this." Anya responded confidently. She could see Axel and Mick in her peripheral vision, both watching the trio curiously. "Let's do it."

"Alright. El, let's go to this dream circle," Kali nodded towards El, who closed her eyes. Anya felt it again, the tugging at her temples, before she gasped as they were all plunged into the dark world. The black water rippled gently beneath their feet.

"Anya, I'm going to go into your head. it feels strange at first, but don't fight it – if you do, it will only hurt," Kali instructed.

"OK," Anya watched as the dark skinned girl moved forwards, reaching out and placing her finger in the centre of her forehead. The scenery around them completely changed. Anya stared around. They were in a living room. The wallpaper had been painted a light yellow and it was peeling around the edges. One sofa stood in the centre facing an old TV set, the screen fizzingly with static. The room appeared empty, until a four-year-old Anya came into view from behind the curtains.

Her much younger self appeared upset – tears were streaming down

her face. Anya could see she must have been scolded for something, for her miniature self-began to stomp her feet a few times.

Without warning, the grey curtains burst into flames. The fire spread rapidly in a blaze of heat, crackling and singing as it destroyed the material. Anya didn't look perturbed in the slightest, in fact, she looked...happy.

Anya's tiny hand sat on the flames and she giggled, hearing the fire whispering to her, telling her to keep burning.

"Anya! Oh my God! Benny! Benny quick the house is on fire!" Patricia Hammond came rushing into the room, her youthful face full of absolute terror. She scooped up Anya quickly.

The scene changed. Both she, Patricia and her father were now stood on the front drive, watching as their entire house burnt to the ground.

"It's my daughter, Anya. Well, I read that you have helped children in the past who have...strange gifts?" Patricia voiced as Anya was pulled away. They were in Hawkins Laboratory. Her mother sat opposite a grey-haired man in a suit, his eyes dark with something unmistakably evil beneath.

"And what is it that your daughter can do, Mrs Hammond?" His voice was smooth, hands clasped together in front of him. He watched as Anya sat on her mother's lap, like a hawk eyeing its prey.

"She...oh this sounds crazy,"

"There is nothing you can tell me that will surprise me, Patricia."

"She sets things on fire, Doctor Brenner. At first I thought it was just a coincidence...or something. But every time Anya has a tantrum or feels threatened – it's like a spark and the next thing, she's on fire! She burnt down our house! I just...I don't know what to do, we have no money and nowhere to live..." Patricia's blue eyes filled with tears as she bounced an oblivious Anya on her knee.

"I completely understand. We have a programme here that would be absolutely perfect for your daughter," Doctor Brenner pushed a piece

of paper towards her mother. "You need only sign this,"

"I just want you to help her, Doctor. So, she can live a normal life, like the other kids. She's dangerous. You have no idea the destructive force she is capable of,"

"I promise, Patricia, I will do everything in my power to help your daughter."

Anya watched in dismay as her mother signed the papers before her. Images began flashing through her mind. Doctor Brenner forcing her to set objects on fire, animals on fire, *people* on fire. His employees electrocuted her, tortured her. They told her to set her own arms on fire then held her down under water until the flames went out.

It was a horror show.

She wanted it to stop, *needed* it to stop.

"I want her to remember none of this. Suppress her memories, make her forget all of it." Patricia paced around a small hospital room, Anya's tiny form lying on a bed with her hands and arms strapped down tightly. She was crying profusely, every time a spark shot from her hands, the doctors threw ice cold water over her.

"It may take a while to suppress her gifts. They are very powerful," A woman in a lab coat said monotonously, her hazel eyes emotionless.

"Just do it."

They were leaving the labs now. Anya trotted next to her mother with a smile on her face, clearly having no clue as to where she was or what had happened there. Two girls passed them in the hallway – one with dark, tanned skin, the other pale with a shaved head. They were waving at her as if they knew her, and she merely stared at them curiously before Patricia tugged her away quickly.

"Mommy, what is this number on my wrist?" She asked.

"It's nothing. We are getting it removed today," Her Mom said curtly, as Anya's small blue eyes looked inquisitively at the number '009' on the inside of her arm.

The darkness descended once more. Anya panted for breath as she looked at her reflection in the black water. "It was my Mom...she... she had my memories taken away..."

"Jane was right. You are gifted, just like us," Kali reached over and pulled out Anya's wrist, where only just visibly, there was a tiny scar. "Your mother saved your life,"

Anya said nothing, in too much shock to comprehend her words. El had now stepped forwards herself. "Anya...I promised, I would show you how your father died. Do you still want to see?"

There was little point in arguing now. Anya had come this far, she may as well go all the way, no matter how painful the truth may be. She took hold of El's hand, allowing the girl to pull her mind into a very familiar building.

Her Dad's diner at closing time. The place was empty, save for her father who was washing up dishes in the back. Only this time, there was someone else with him. El. The young girl's head was shaved, and she wore a large yellow T-Shirt over her tiny body.

"That ice-cream good?" Benny asked her. Anya felt her heart drop into her stomach at the sound of his voice. She hadn't heard the deep, southern timbre in so long, or set eyes on his slightly overweight frame as he happily got on with working. "Do you ever smile kid? You know?" Benny forced a stupid grin on his bearded face, making the younger El grin as she scoffed down her food with a spoon.

There was a soft knock at the door. El immediately stiffened, a frightened look on her face, as Anya's father held out his hand. "Don't worry. Who ever it is, I'll just tell to go away real quick, alright? Stay there,"

He paced over to the door, swiping open the lock and coming face to face with the same woman Anya had seen earlier. She had blond, blow dried hair with icy hazel eyes that portrayed the same detached disposition.

"Hi, you must be Benny Hammond?"

"I'm afraid I am, I'm afraid we're closed for the evening too, you should try come back tomorrow mornin'!"

"Connie Fraser? Social services? We spoke on the phone?" The woman had a blank smile on her face as she spoke.

"Oh, of course. Beggin' your pardon, but, you came a lot quicker than I expected – it's a heck of a drive,"

"Not too bad this time of night. So...where is she?"

Her father opened the shutter wider, allowing the woman entrance. "Right, she's in the kitchen. Haven't told her you were comin' though, so tread gently, she'd dead skittish. Your voice sounds different on the phone-"

His words were cut off as the blond woman pulled out a gun from her bag, firing it immediately at her father. The silencer muffled the sound of the gunshot as he hit the ground like a stone, dead.

Anya screamed.

She couldn't watch anymore. The pain was rushing through her head as she snatched her hands away from Kali's and El's. They were back in the warehouse, blood dripping from their noses.

Tears fell freely over Anya's cheeks as she stared at El. "It was you. My Dad died because he was helping you!"

El's eyes filled with tears, her expression full of sorrow. She said nothing as Anya rose from her seat, her memories hitting her like bullets. She remembered everything. The fires, her gifts, the labs... now her father's death...

No one stopped her as she started running.

18. Chapter 18

Stranger Love

Chapter Eighteen – Sisters

The Chicago back streets were empty as Anya sobbed.

She sobbed for her father, for his untimely death. He died doing the thing he did best – *helping* people in need. Benny had been shot in cold blood, his murderer pulling the trigger without thought, without hesitation, without remorse.

It was evil. A cruel, sick joke that the universe had unjustly dealt her.

Then Anya sobbed for her own sake. El hadn't just revealed her memories of her father dying. Pandora's box had been opened and the events of the year before had come spilling out in all their shit show glory.

Barbara died at the jaws of the strange creature she'd seen when she crashed her car. In the labs, El had opened a portal to another dimension, the 'upside down' as it was referred to. Will Byers had been in the dark, cold parallel world the entire time he'd been missing. The kids knew about it, Hopper knew about it. Every single person she thought cared about her had been *lying* to her face for year – pretending they hadn't known the reason for her father's death.

Her mother had been lying too – but for much longer.

Her skin prickled with heat, a deep rage bubbling within her chest until she felt she may choke on it.

There was a whispering, somewhere in the back of her mind. The noise crackled, popped and licked at her brain. It did not form understandable words and yet Anya knew perfectly what it wanted. They surged over her, finally, after years of suppression, allowed to break free.

A few minutes went by before Anya realised her hands were on fire. She stared at them with widened eyes, both shocked and awed. How

was it possible she could wield this power? Anya was just an ordinary girl from Hawkins – there was nothing special about her in the slightest. Yet standing in the middle of the abandoned street, Anya felt more powerful than she'd ever felt in her life.

The flames reflected in her watery eyes. She could burn them. Burn all the people who'd lied to her, made her feel like *she* was the one who was crazy.

Anya closed her eyes. *What was she thinking?* That wasn't who she was, or who her father would want her to be. The biggest question of all was simply this – *what was she going to do now?*

Her life had been mapped out in her head for so long, Anya had no idea what to do with it. The feeling of overwhelming anger and grief hit her like a brick as she fell to her knees on the wet ground. The flames on her hands fizzled and hissed as they encountered the dampness, flaring angrily for a moment.

"Stop it!" Anya voiced, and the fire immediately went out. Well, that was interesting. She wiped the tears from her eyes before staring at her hands for a moment. "Fire...start?" The flames flared up somewhat aggressively and Anya shrieked. "Stop, stop stop!" The fire extinguished again quickly as she panted for breath.

"Ok." In her mind, Anya imagined the small flare of a match lighting against coarse paper. Instantly, a few sparks flickered at her fingertips, growing as large as the flame of a candle with her avid concentration. Despite her earlier upset – Anya smiled, feeling the hot stickiness of blood dripping from her nose. The flames felt natural to her, because her gift was something she'd been born with.

Deciding she'd wallowed in self-pity enough, Anya made her way back to the abandoned warehouse. El was probably upset, and though Anya was angry, she couldn't blame the young girl for her father's death.

She found both El and Kali sat on the roof. The night sky was inky black, twinkling with a lack of stars due to the light pollution of the city. The curly haired girl stood up immediately, her brown eyes full of worry and sorrow.

"Anya-" Kali said in a warning tone, obviously unsure as to how this was going to play out.

"It's alright. I'm not going to cause a scene or anything. I just want to talk," Anya reassured Kali.

"You are angry with me." El stated forlornly.

"Yes. I was angry with you." Anya paced towards one of the chairs, taking a seat quickly. The others followed suit. "I'm not anymore,"

"It was my fault your papa died, I put him in danger,"

"My father died because those evil people killed him, they are the ones to blame." Anya felt tears well up in her eyes. "I am angry because people have been lying to me. I am angry, because I have this gift that I know nothing about. I don't even know why I have it, or what it's for...all I know is that it led me to you." She took hold of El's hand, then Kali's. "It led me to both of you. I never had any siblings, now...I have two,"

Kali was smiling through tears. "It's like...I just feel whole. Like a piece of me was missing...and now it's not...does that make any sense?"

"Yes," El agreed.

"I think you were both sent here for a reason...I think, Jane's mother knew we had to be together. This is where we were meant to be," Kali wiped her tears with her free hand, her mascara smudging a little beneath her eyes.

"Yeah...I think so too." Anya nodded, their hands squeezing together tightly. "El, don't look so worried. I don't blame you, I promise,"

The young girl smiled in relief, looping her arms around Anya's neck in an unexpected embrace. She gave El a tight hug back, Kali joining in until all three girls squealed as Anya's chair nearly rocked them all backwards onto the floor.

...

"Think about something in your life that angers you." Kali instructed.

Anya watched as El outstretched her hand towards a giant, rusted metal train carriage, whilst Anya did the same.

"Now channel it. Dig deeper. Your whole life you've been lied to."

Images of her mother flashed before her eyes. In the lab, where she'd been electrocuted into forgetting her gift, forgetting her friends. Her father's murderer, those callous blue eyes looking down at his corpse as if he were a piece of garbage.

"The bad men took away your family. Your father, your mother. They stole your life, your home, they lied and lied and made you think you were crazy!"

Kali's voice drowned out as El let out a scream, the metal dragging over the concrete. Anya willed the rusted iron to start to burn, told the flames to consume it. Within a second the entire structure billowed as it scorched from the heat, the metal glowing a bright amber.

Whoops and hollers sounded to their right. The gang of miscreants seemed less horrified by their abilities than they were downright impressed – though it wasn't surprising considering Kali was their leader. Anya figured not many other people would be quite so open minded.

"Does this happen all the time?" Anya asked as she wiped the blood from her nose, feeling quite lethargic after using her powers. El had fallen to her knees with the effort of it, breathing heavily.

"Yes. It gets better the more you use your gifts – you haven't been able to use yours for a long time, so it might take a while for your body to get used to it," Kali said, helping El to her feet. A large chunk of the metal roof collapsed with a loud crash, sending sparks and pieces of metal flying into the sky.

"I better put that out," Anya muttered, stretching out her hands to simmer down the flames. It took her a minute, but she got there, opening her eyes to find the carriage smouldering.

"When you think you've seen it all," Axel said behind her shoulder, making her nearly jump out of her skin. She ignored his snigger, feeling quite light headed as she sank down on an old barrel.

"How do you guys feel?" Kali said with wide eyes full of sheer determination, looking at the two exhausted girls in front of her.

"Good," El breathed, taking a seat next to Anya.

"Good." Kali nodded her head with a grin of approval. "I think it's about time you guys learnt what we do around here."

19. Chapter 19

Stranger Love

Chapter Nineteen - Lost Girl

Billy took a lengthy drag of his cigarette, his eyes casting over the sky for a moment. He just couldn't get the look of pure, unadulterated fear he'd seen on Max's face, not two minutes ago, out of his head. The girl had practically folded in on herself in front of his eyes and it was his fault.

Everything was always his fault.

Maxine had a way of winding him up something stupid. She did something reckless, and Billy got the full brunt of his Dad's aggression. He didn't even know if Max knew what his father did to him, or how lucky she was that he hadn't turned his fists on *her*.

If Neil ever did that...well, Billy may just lose his mind. It was one thing to beat up him, Billy was six feet tall with little to no body fat – he could take it. But Max, she was tiny. She was fragile, easily broken no matter how tough she made out to be.

She was similar to Anya, in that way.

His frustration however, his anger, towards himself, the world, his Dad, often got Billy so riled up he had to take some of it out on Max. She'd been late after school, *again*, and he couldn't remember the amount of times he told her to *just be on time*. The car ride back home had been full of shouting, mainly on Billy's part, before he ended up punching his steering wheel a few times whilst his face went red with rage.

Max – maybe she thought he was going to turn his fists on her?

What scared Billy the most, out of everything that truly scared the shit out of him, was that one day he might. One day, he might lose himself entirely and strike Maxine down.

It turned his blood to ice, made the hairs on the back of his neck

stand up and his stomach churn in absolute horror. He'd beaten up a few guys in his day, but he would never, ever, hit a woman. Would he?

Billy flicked his cigarette butt away and sighed. Max was in her bedroom, sulking, probably. He'd have to go in there later and try to smooth things over, in case she decided to go running to Susan, which would then result in him receiving a black eye. He often wondered what it would feel like to have Neil cowering in the corner, whilst he raised his fists and beat the ever-living daylight out of him. The satisfaction of feeling his bones crunching beneath his fists, flesh tearing apart and blood spewing from his wounds would be something akin to a miracle – Billy thought.

"Billy!" He heard his name and quickly looked up, catching sight of Patricia. Anya's Mom had exactly the same flighty, 'I just woke up this beautiful' appearance as her daughter. Both women were hot, for sure, and Billy more often than not had a thing for older women...

But something about Anya just seemed to stick.

Despite this, Billy plastered the best sexy smirk he could across his lips. "Mrs Hammond, how can I help?"

A worried frown worked its way onto her features. "I thought you might...oh god..."

"Is everything ok?" Billy asked.

"No...it's Anya...have you seen her? Or heard from her?"

He thought back to the last time he had seen her. Wearing her Flashdance costume and looking far too beautiful for her own good, until she decided to go ape-shit and start rambling about 'aliens' again. Anya was a total wild card and from the moment he'd met her, Billy couldn't remember experiencing a dull moment when she was around. "Well, I thought she was sick after the party, she wasn't in school so I figured it was like the flu,"

"I haven't seen her since yesturday morning, Billy. She left a note and now she's gone, and I just thought maybe she was with you," Patricia

tugged a little at her blue flannel shirt. She was thinner than Anya, Billy realised, and he knew because he'd seen first-hand just how perfectly filled out her daughter actually was. He thought back to their rendezvous in his car and felt a pang of desire course through him. No girl had ever left him as wanting as she had, or keen to engage in a repeat performance.

Patricia's words, however, sparked a different kind of reaction. Billy couldn't understand why, but he felt concerned for Anya. He was worried about her. "What do you mean she's gone? Gone where?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. She's never done this before, I mean, that was my trick when her father...anyway, if she's not with you can you think of where she would go? I've checked the diner and school, even the cemetery,"

"What makes you think I can help?" Billy asked, genuinely not trying to sound rude but suddenly very keen to jump into his car and go searching for Anya.

Patricia gave him a look that read 'bitch, please'. "You think I don't know about you and my daughter? I've seen the way you two are together. It's like she is the match and you are the gasoline,"

"I don't know -"

"It's alright Billy. My daughter will be with whoever she wants, do you think I could ever really tell her what to do?" The brunette before him gave a rue smile. "You know how she is,"

"Yeah, I do," Billy agreed whole heartedly, letting out a long drawn out sigh. "I'll go look for her,"

"You don't have to do that -"

"Just stay home, if she does turn up at least you'll be here. It's alright Mrs Hammond, I'll drag her ass back kicking and screamin' if I have to,"

"Thank you!" Patricia then did something he did not expect. She wrapped her arms around him tightly, as a mother would her son, squeezing his much larger body very tightly considering her thin

frame. When she drew back, her hand remained on his shoulder. "You're a good kid, Billy,"

He stared at her for a moment, wondering how on earth he'd managed to earn *that* response. He'd been called many things in his lifetime, but a 'good kid' was not one of them. Billy had to admit, the feeling of her maternal hug, the way she was looking at him, made his icy heart thaw.

Billy merely nodded at the older woman, not sure what else he could say to her. The feeling in his heart threatened to elicit emotions inside of him that he hadn't felt in a very long time. He could feel Patricia watching him as he threw himself into his Camaro, racing away as quickly as possible before she could see the tear falling down his left cheek.

...

Some weeks earlier...

"Hargrove, are you coming to hang out with us after?" Tommy H, Hawkin's biggest moron since the word was invented, said as he tied up the laces on his trainers. Billy fought the urge to tell the idiot to fuck off, having no intention whatsoever of hanging out with a bunch of overgrown man-children.

He also had to babysit Max – a fact that had his insides roiling. "No,"

"Aw come on Billy, don't be a loser," Harry whined from the further side of the bench, immediately blanching at Billy's glare in his direction.

"Believe it or not, I have better things to do than hang out with you pussies," Billy snapped, pulling on his white tank top.

"Ahh, I get it. You're getting some pussy tonight aren't yah?" Tommy H grinned. "Who is it this time? Hope it's not Tina again, the amount she gets I'm pretty sure she's as loose as Harry's Mom,"

"Fuck off Tommy, no one's Mom is as loose as yours – I would know, I fucked her last night," Harry shot back, earning a round of snickers from the other guys. Billy was pretty sure none of these hicks had

even seen a real girl naked, let alone fucked one. The girls in Hawkins were desperate for Billy because he actually knew his way around their bodies – a feat he figured none of the fools with him could comprehend.

"Think of all the girls in school and then tell me who you'd fuck in order," A kid named Joe piped up, the scrawniest on the basketball team but equally one of the best players.

"Gemma, Tina, Carol, Ruby and Amy – top five," Harry responded immediately.

"Hey!" Dan roared from a block over, popping his head around the corner. "Don't bring my girlfriend into this, alright?"

"Sorry Dad!" Harry drawled, rolling his eyes.

"Nah, your list is bullshit – you totally missed out Anya Hammond. She's like, one of the hottest chicks in this school," Tommy H leered, his tongue practically hanging out of his mouth. His words caught Billy's attention. He couldn't ignore the sudden explosion of anger and protectiveness overcoming him. Tommy H either didn't notice the sudden daggers Billy was casting his way, or didn't care, because the prick just kept on talking. "I bet she's a proper slut in the sack – the quiet ones always are! Have you seen her tits? I would pay good money to cum all over them, after she'd given me a blow job of course – and can you imagine how tight her pu -"

A red mist descended over Billy's eyes and before he knew it, Tommy H was on the receiving end of his fists. He punched him once, twice, three times, the smaller boy landing heavily on the tiled floor. Billy continued to lay into him, his foot connecting with Tommy H's ribs so hard he let out a yowl of agony.

Heaving the boy up quickly, Billy threw him harshly against the lockers. He gripped tightly onto his collar, leaning towards him so their faces were mere inches apart. "You ever, *fucking ever*, talk about Anya like that again, I will fucking kill you. OK?"

Tommy H was visibly shaking, his eyes as wide as saucers. "Y...yes,"

"I didn't fucking hear you, Tommy H. You don't look at her, talk to her, or even think about her. Got it?"

"Yes, I got it Billy, I understand," He spluttered, letting out a loud groan as Billy dropped him to the floor. He turned to the flabbergasted guys in the locker room. Harry's deodorant lay limp in his hand, whilst Dan and Joe watched with wide eyes and open mouths. They all shifted uncomfortably, obviously far too scared to say anything.

"That goes for you guys too," Billy warned lowly, glowering at them all pointedly. He grabbed his bags, slipping a cigarette into his mouth before marching away, feeling an all too familiar sting on his knuckles.

...

Present Day

The sun was setting and Billy was no closer to finding Anya than he had been a few hours ago. The girl had completely vanished and he could feel his temper flaring angrily. He'd looked everywhere, even in the places Patricia had looked, just in case she'd decided to make an appearance. He knew Anya was a bit of a loose cannon but disappearing out of the blue like that was definitely uncharacteristic.

Billy Hargrove did not waste his precious time searching for missing women. What had he turned into? More to the point, what had Anya Hammond turned him into?

He'd had enough of her. She was like a vine, a vine growing slowly but surely up his body, twisting and turning her way into his life until the moment she had wrapped tightly around his soul. Billy didn't even try to fight it, to cut the vine before it descended his heart. He was a weak, cliché guy who was whipped.

Glancing over to the passenger footwell, Billy caught sight of her Fleetwood Mac cassette tape. He could picture her now, sitting beside him as her head bopped to the music, singing along to 'Dreams' with that sweet as honey voice.

Cursing out loud, Billy decided to follow his gut instincts and check the cemetery one last time. The parking lot was empty save for two vehicles – and one of them was that goddamn ridiculous old truck that Anya had wasted \$200 on.

He jumped out of his car quickly, slamming the door shut. Anya had been missing for nearly two days and the first place she showed up in was the cemetery?! Billy marched through the grounds, swooping his eyes about the mass of graves that lined the grass, feeling the starts of his famous temper working up into a frenzy.

All the anger, however, dissipated the moment he clapped eyes on her.

Anya was on her knees at the foot of a grave, her head hung low and her shoulders shaking lightly as she cried. Her long brunette curls covered most of her face, her small hands clutching at the blades of long grass. Billy faltered, completely at a loss of what to do until she turned her head and met his eyes.

"Anya! Where the hell have you been? I've been looking for you all over!" Billy cried, watching as she wiped the tears from her eyes and stood up.

"You've been looking for me?" Her question tumbled from her plump lips quietly, voice trembling.

"Hell yeah, I've been looking for you! According to your ma you've been missing since yesturday!"

Anya had the sense to look abashed. "I just had to...get away,"

"And where exactly was that?"

"I erm...went to Chicago, to see some friends,"

"Chicago? Are you fucking kidding me with that shit?" Billy stared at her incredulously, trying to work out what the hell had been going through her mind.

Anya's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. "Look, I've had a really tough couple of days alright? So, skip the lecture!"

He almost laughed at the irony of her statement – Billy was usually on the receiving end of lectures, whether they be from her or one of the many fucked up adults in his life. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Anya gave him an infuriatingly vague reply, as she were purposefully trying to wind him up. He could see she was upset, there was still evidence of her wet tears on her cheeks, a rosy hue to her pale complexion and the whites of her eyes tinged with red blotches.

"Anya, you've had your Mom in bits and me circling town like a madman for the past fucking three hours, the least you owe me is an explanation," Billy pushed, taking a few tentative steps towards her. Anya turned to face the grave, her father's grave. It seemed so pointless to Billy, to visit people in a graveyard. They were dead, weren't they? What did these people know of anything going on around them? They were just corpses, decomposing until they finally rotted away into nothing.

Billy would be damned if he was buried in such a way. No, he wanted to be cremated, his ashes allowed to fly free somewhere. He didn't want anyone visiting his buried body, crying over him the way Anya was now.

"Like I told you before, I went to see some friends. They helped me get some answers," She said. "I was on my way home...I just, needed to get it all off my chest first,"

"You mean...you actually talk to your Dad's grave?" Billy asked with a frown. That notion was even worse – she didn't just cry and place flowers there, she spoke to the grave as if he would pop out and talk back!

"Yes, what's wrong with that?"

"It's just, he isn't going to talk back, Anya,"

"I know that," She said in exasperation, staring at him like he had two heads. "It's kind of therapeutic, you know? Like, somewhere, he may be listening,"

"You're crazier than I thought," Billy shook his head.

"You have no idea," Anya murmured, seemingly happy with being as obtuse as possible.

"Right, well, whatever. Your Mom is home and I said I'd bring you back, so let's go," Billy gestured her to start moving with his hand.

"Yeah...I just..." Anya faltered. She suddenly appeared terrified, her hands wringing together and eyes darting from him to the floor.

"Are you scared your Mom's gonna yell at you?" He asked gruffly, finding the notion almost laughable. Patricia was many things, but he doubted she was a teddy bear compared to his father.

"No, it's not her. It's what I'm going to do..." A breeze filtered through the cemetery, whistling past gravestones, flurries of dead leaves scattering along the path. Anya stood before him, on one of the coldest days they'd had in Hawkins for a long time, without even so much as a coat on. How was she not freezing? Billy wondered how she could stand it, with just her thin shirt and a pair of jeans. Maybe the upset state she was in had managed to block her thoughts from the cold?

He couldn't help but reach out, encompassing her shoulders in his hands. "What exactly are you going to do?"

"It's complicated." She voiced, lifting her eyes to meet his.

"Anya," He warned, having just about enough of her games.

"You're right - I should go home," Anya said quickly, placing a reassuring hand on his chest. "I've been gone too long...thank you, for coming to find me,"

Billy could feel the warmth of her hand through his coat. She was like a beacon of heat and it radiated from her very skin. Maybe Anya still had a temperature, and that's why she was acting so crazy? "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, Mr Worry - I'm fine," She gave a small smile. "Let's go,"

For some reason, when she took hold of his hand, Billy let her. He let her lead them from the cemetery, let her gently kiss him on the mouth and tell him how sweet he was (teasingly, of course). Billy followed her truck home in a slightly dazed mentality, as he tried to figure out how he'd managed to fall so badly for Anya Hammond.

20. Chapter 20

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty – No Such Thing As Normal

"These are the bad men, as you call them El. The ones we believe are still alive," Kali said as the group of people stood opposite a wall collaged with photographs and notes written in red ink. Anya regarded the display wearily. The sheer amount of individuals involved in the 'experiments' was overwhelming to say the least. How many of them were out in the world right now, living normal lives as if they hadn't participated in the horrific deeds of the past? How had so many of them managed to find themselves working for a madman such as Brenner?

She could still picture his cruel, calculating eyes. The man her mother had put so much faith in, the man who'd completely destroyed El and Kali's childhoods.

Anya paced forwards, peering at a photo of two men in lab coats, one with a large cross over his face. "I'm guessing the ones crossed out are..."

"Dead? Yeah." Axel finished for her, running his finger over his throat.

"You killed them?" She regarded the group.

"Does that scare you, Prom Queen?" Dottie asked her, tilting her head in a taunting way towards Anya, her make-up smeared messily around her eyes and lips.

"Doesn't exactly make me feel great, Harley Quinn," Anya bit back, earning snickers from the entire group.

"She got you there," Mick said, dodging a sharp elbowing from Dottie with a smirk on her mouth.

"Do you recognise any of them, Anya? El?" Kali, ever the serious one, got back to business quickly. Anya wasn't sure she wanted to point

one of the many people out – she figured it was as good as signing their death sentence.

"Him," El spoke up, pulling a newspaper article from the cork board. El held up the picture of a balding man in his 50's who Anya recognised from her new set of memories. The words RETIRED made the title, the smaller print unreadable to her as Kali retrieved the piece of paper.

"Ray Carroll."

"He hurt mama," El said.

"He did more than hurt your mama," Kali informed her. "He hurt me, tortured me, made my life a living hell,"

"I remember him, he was the one who electrocuted me..." Anya visibly remembered him standing over her, holding an elongated taser towards her quivering form. "Did he do that to you too?" She queried El, who nodded. Anya grit her teeth. "Bastard."

"The bad men like Ray know about us. It's made them hard to track...but maybe not anymore," Kali finished her words by looking pointedly at El. Anya bit her bottom lip, feeling a surge of panic rise into her throat. Kali wasn't going to ask El to find this man, so they could actually kill him, was she?

"You want me to find him?" El flashed her brown eyes from Anya to Kali unsurely.

"Yes,"

"No,"

Both girls answered simultaneously, the pair staring at each other – Kali in surprise and Anya in sheer determination.

"You can't ask her to do that, it's not fair," Anya said, taking the photo from Kali.

"Why not? He hurt us! He is bad, and we need to get retribution for his crimes!"

"I know they hurt us, but it's not exactly that black and white, is it? My Mom supported Dr Brenner at the beginning. She handed me over to him! What are you going to do? Find her and kill her too?" Anya stressed. "Why isn't her picture up here on the wall of doom, huh?"

"Your mother made a mistake, she wasn't in there, making our lives hell," Kali retrieved the newspaper article from Anya with a swipe, holding it out to El. "If you want, take it, find him. It's your choice, El,"

Anya shook her head in exasperation. "Fine. Yeah, El it's your choice but I'm not going to be a part of this vigilante madness,"

"It's cool. Not everyone is cut out for revenge, Princess. You should go back to painting your nails and picking out a dress for homecoming," Axel's calling her Princess reminded her of Billy. It was just the sort of stupid sexist remark that he would come out with, and the constant insults towards her just because of her gender was starting to grate.

"Do you really think it's wise to insult the girl who could set you on fire? You have more hairspray than hair on your head, it wouldn't take much, trust me," Anya sniped at him, feeling a spark of heat flare at her fingertips.

Mick grinned like a kid would on Christmas morning. "I looove this chick, can we keep her?"

"El, can I talk to you a sec?" Anya implored her younger friend, ignoring the stares of all the other five occupants in the room. She took hold of El's arm and pulled her lightly out the door. "I think we need to re-think this,"

"Why?" El asked, not rudely, but sharply enough to make Anya wince as they got further enough away to avoid eavesdroppers.

"Because - look, I get it, like I said before I am angry too, but enough is enough. These people are trouble and they are going to drag you down with them,"

"Kali is our sister,"

"Yes, and that's brilliant. I love that we found her, and I'm grateful she helped me get back my memories. There has to be a line though El. Taking revenge and killing those people isn't going to bring my Dad back, or your mama. It isn't going to stop the hurt, no matter what Kali tells you," Anya pushed a stray curl from El's forehead, hoping the girl would start seeing some sense. She was blinded by anger, an anger only magnified by her abilities. It was a dangerous mix.

"I want to hurt the bad people. I want them to hurt just as much as I do, because it isn't fair. It isn't fair that they get to get away with what they did," El's eyes were icy, dead-set, determined.

"What if the police catch you? What then? I saw in the dream circle that you live with Hopper, I saw how much he cares about you. How much Will, Mike, Dustin and Lucas miss you!"

"Hopper never let me go anywhere. All he wanted to do was control me, like papa."

"Yes, you're right. Your policeman did want to control you. Because he doesn't understand you, he doesn't understand us," Kali's voice sounded from nowhere, both Anya and El wheeling around in surprise. She still held the photograph of Ray Carroll in her grasp. "They'll never truly except us, Anya. They pretend to understand, to act like they are fine with us being what we are...but the fear...the fear of the unknown will always frighten them. You can go back to your old life Anya. You can pretend everything is normal for a while. I know sooner or later, you will begin to comprehend just how different you are, how special, and that life won't be enough for you anymore."

El walked over to Kali, taking the picture out of her hand. "I'm finding this Ray Carroll. I am going to make him pay,"

Anya could see there was no use in trying to dissuade El, for the young brunette had already made up her mind. "Fine. If you want to do this El, I won't stop you. But like I said before...I'm not going to be a part of it. I'm going home, I have to have this out with my Mom,"

"I wish you would stay," El said sadly.

"It's ok El. Anya has made her own decision, and that's fine. None of us are prisoners here, and that's how it stays," Kali paced over to Anya, placing her hand on her shoulder. "I do not understand your choice, but I respect it. You will always be my sister, and I am always here for you, if you need me. All of us,"

"I'll hold you to that," Anya gave a tiny smile, that turned into a squeak as El threw herself into her arms, knocking the wind out of her lungs.

"Thank you for helping me," The girl said into her shoulder.

"Thank you for helping me, even though I wish you would just come home," Anya breathed after their embrace ended, giving her a playful knock on the chin. The other members of the gang had filtered into the equation, Funshine and Mick watching curiously whilst Axel and Dottie stood around the fire burning brightly in the incinerator.

"See you around Prom Queen, don't forget to tell your jockstrap of a boyfriend to wear a tux," Axel, who just didn't seem to get warnings at all, grinned at her snidely. Dottie snickered, the pair of them giving each other a high-five. Anya merely shrugged, clenching her fist tightly. The fire flared upwards in one huge rush, sending Dot and Axel jumping backwards with shrieks.

Grinning in triumph, Anya stalked out of the warehouse, hearing the sounds of Mick and Funshine roaring with laughter.

...

Her home looked the same as ever. The truck wheezed into the driveway, engine clanking around beneath the bonnet the moment she hit the break. Anya could hear Billy's laugh in her mind, and though it had been due to direct amusement on the state of her vehicle, she wouldn't have missed his genuine laugh for the world.

How had so much changed, within the past twenty-four-hours? Anya regarded her house with indecision. She could walk through the doorway and lie. Tell her mom she'd stayed at Gemma's and hidden in her closet so her parents didn't know. This avenue was tempting. It was far easier than what she really needed to do, far easier than the

truth.

Whoever said life was easy?

Billy's engine cut off and she spied him jumping out of his car. Anya mirrored him, for one moment considering the idea of convincing him to take them away somewhere. Maybe back to Chicago, so she could keep tabs on El. The girl was perfectly capable of looking after herself, but Anya felt overly protective of her now.

"So, how much trouble you gonna be in then?" Billy asked, having just retrieved her from the cemetery. Anya had been more than surprised to see him. He'd taken it upon himself to try and find her for the best part of three hours, if he was to be believed, just because her Mom asked him to. Was Billy displaying a part of his character that he hid oh so well? Anya hated to sound cliché, but she wanted to think that maybe, just maybe, she'd been a good influence on him.

"Well, let's just say this isn't going to be an easy conversation," She replied.

"Are you ever going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I expect one day..." Anya wasn't so sure when that day would come.
"I need to go inside,"

"You know...you still owe me a date," He said lowly, the sexy smile he used to flirt plastered onto his face. "I haven't forgotten,"

Anya watched as he placed a cigarette deliberately slowly between his straight teeth, swooping his eyes over her body. She smiled in amusement, despite the circumstances, deciding to indulge him, just once. "Tell you what, how about you pick me up tomorrow night, around 7?"

"Hm. Sure you won't be grounded?" Billy challenged.

"I'd like to see her try," Anya leant forwards and kissed the tip of his nose, leaving him to watch her retreat back to the house. The door wasn't locked as she pushed it open, the house eerily silent. The silence was broken, however, by Bracken, who raced out of the kitchen and made a beeline for Anya.

"Hey girl, have you missed me?" Anya cooed softly, giving the canine a few good scratches behind the ears. Her tail wagged furiously, paws bouncing over the floor in elation.

"Anya." Patricia voiced from the doorway, a stream of light flooding the hallway as the door was widened. "Would you care to tell me where the hell you've been?"

Anya straightened up, looking at her Mom for what seemed like the first time. The woman before her was still the same Mom. She was still the same mother who'd taken her to dance classes when she was nine, who'd held her hand on the first day of school. The same Mom who had paid for her guitar, despite having no money.

But it was also the same Mom who'd lied to her for the majority of their lives.

"I think we should sit down." Anya said swiftly, passing her Mom to sit at the breakfast table.

"Anya, what is going on?" Patricia sat opposite, the look of worry on her face blooming. Anya said nothing, merely reached into her jacket pocket to retrieve the newspaper article she had acquired from Becky Ives. She slid the piece of paper towards her Mom, who visibly paled at the sight of it. "Anya-

"Do you know, who killed Dad?" She interrupted.

"Yeah...it was a thief -"

"Stop lying."

"Anya, as far as I know that is the truth!"

"Well you're wrong. Dad wasn't killed by someone random thief, he was murdered in cold blood, shot point blank by the people who you handed me to when I was barely five years old!" Anya slapped her hand onto the table harshly, causing her Mom to jump. "Stop pretending you didn't have suspicions! You knew there was something else going on. Will Byers, Barb? Their disappearances were not just mere coincidence, and you knew it."

"Ok, alright. I thought that maybe it was strange, but I never imagined it was them,"

"Dr Brenner. He was there, he saw Dad die," Anya let a tear fall down her cheek. "He was a monster, Mom. Pure evil through and through!"

"I didn't know!" Patricia wailed.

"It wasn't just me, either. But you did know that, didn't you? I wasn't the only child in those labs,"

"I couldn't save all of you, Anya. I was just one person, fighting a whole bunch of crazy, powerful people! Dr Brenner would have killed you, he would have killed me and your father too. I did what I had to,"

"You should have done more!" Anya exclaimed. "Or how about just not handed me over to a psychopath, huh?"

Patricia sighed heavily, tears flooding her blue eyes as she eyed the picture of a young Anya for a long while. Her fingers traced the bow on her dress, hands shaking as she looked over the words of the article. "Anya...you have to understand. When me and your father met, we were so young. He was from a family of labourers, wood loggers. I was from a wealthy family...my father, as you know, owned a prestigious law firm and had control over pretty much every bank in Indiana. I fell in love with Benny instantly, but my family, even his, they didn't except us. It was different times, back then. Money meant everything and my parents wanted me to marry an equally wealthy man who they approved of.

I was so in love with your father that nothing they said was going to change my mind, so we eloped. I figured, once we were married, they would have no choice but to be gracious of our union. Boy, was I wrong. My father was furious. He refused to except Benny, and did everything in his power to convince me to leave him. You can imagine his horror, then, when I told him I was pregnant, with you.

Knowing I was never going to leave your father, my parents cut me off completely. They wouldn't speak to me, wouldn't respond to my letters – even when I sent them a picture of you, mere weeks after

you were born.

I spent my days taking care of you and my nights crying myself to sleep. Your father was a dream - he was my rock, and I realised after a while that I had all the family I would ever need.

Times however, were tough. We had no money and we were just so young...Benny worked his ass off day and night to provide for us, finally managing to save enough to buy a small house on the outskirts of Hawkins. We were so proud, so happy that we finally had a place to call our own.

I can remember so vividly the first time we notice there was something different about you. You were nearly two years old, the cutest little thing I'd ever seen. One day you just started crying, for one reason or another, and the next thing I knew, one of the hobs on the cooker flared and set fire to the tea towel on the counter.

We put it down to a malfunction of some sort, but then...things like that just kept happening. A candle would light itself, or a book would randomly burst into flames...the worst one, however, came when you were four.

I'd left you alone in the front room for two minutes...and when I returned, you had your hands on the drapes..."

"The grey curtains?" Anya asked quietly.

"Precisely. And they were on fire. The flames were scolding hot yet you stood right next to them without a single burn on you. We only just managed to get out of the house before it burnt to the ground. We were completely distraught and had no idea what we were going to do...so when I saw that Dr Brenner was taking on children with 'strange' abilities...well, I had to see, I had to know if he could help you," Patricia let out a shaky breath. "Me and your father had no help. No support from anyone. I just needed someone to tell me it was going to be alright, that you were going to be alright,"

"Why didn't you and Dad tell me this? When I was older, when I could handle it?" Anya half pleaded, still finding it hard to understand.

"Because...they told us it would be dangerous for you to remember. That if your powers stayed dormant for too long, it could trigger an overload." Her Mom grasped her hand. "I made you forget because I wanted you to have a normal, healthy life. You were far too perilous as a child, even when they tried to gain control over you,"

"Have you ever thought that they made it worse, not better?"

"Of course. And the moment I realised what they were doing, I had you removed from the programme." The older brunette stressed ardently. "Anya...you have to understand, now that you remember everything, you need to be careful."

"I know..." Anya said. "I met, a couple of others, who are like me. They were not as fortunate as me, to have parents who got me out..."

"And I'm truly sorry for them, believe me," Patricia let tears fall freely down her face. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't see their faces. Oh, Anya...I am just so sorry, for all of it,"

Anya was crying as equally hard by now. She couldn't stop the whirling of emotions tumbling around her mind, like the sea thrashing wildly in a storm. From now on, normal wasn't going to be an option.

A whispering had begun stirring, like tiny wisps of hot smoke billowing around her subconscious.

She wasn't alone.

Not anymore...

21. Chapter 21

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty-One -

Spending the entirety of the night conversing with her Mom, Anya wasn't surprised when she awoke to find it 1:48pm. Despite being so exhausted it had taken but mere minutes for her to fall asleep, she still felt drained – emotionally and physically. Her dreams had been vivid and full of flames, the type that made you feel unrested and weary upon awakening.

Her date with Billy, perhaps, would serve as a needed distraction. Anya had never felt like her brain was so muddled, as if the past 17 years of her life had been somebody else's. The veil wasn't lifted as much as ripped off, revealing the scarred truth that was her past beneath.

Patricia did her best to explain the situation. Anya pitied her parents; it was hard enough raising a child with zero money and no experience, let alone one who spontaneously lit things on fire. It still hurt, though, that she would never be able to talk to her father about it, to ask for his side of the story too. Would he have told her eventually? Or would he have been content to continue the charade of normality?

There were some things she would just never know.

The house was quiet for the remainder of the day. Anya pretended to be asleep when her Mom pushed open her bedroom door, setting down a mug of hot tea on her bedside. She didn't linger, merely closed the door behind her with a soft click. Anya just couldn't face talking to her, needing time to gather her thoughts properly.

Pulling on her green jumpsuit and tousling out her brunette curls, Anya regarded herself in the mirror for a moment. It seemed ridiculous that after all the events of the past few days, she was now going on a date with Billy Hargrove. For a moment she considered cancelling – then the less sensible part of her brain protested loudly.

She wanted to stop thinking about everything, to go out and enjoy herself, even if only to pretend just for one night.

And Billy was one hell of a distraction.

Her Mom glanced up at Anya as she flitted into the kitchen, trying to find her flats. "Anya...you're going out?"

"Yeah,"

"Where? With who?"

"On a date. With Billy," Anya replied, grabbing her shoes and pushing them onto her feet quickly.

Patricia frowned, her arms folded around herself as Bracken trotted hopefully into the hall, probably wondering if she was going on a walk. "Is that a great idea right now?"

"No, but I can't stand the thought of sitting around my room all night,"

"You don't have to sit in your room...we could talk? Get some take-out?"

Anya finally looked into her Mom's eyes, seeing the worry and hurt in her irises. "Mom, I just want to do a normal, teenage girl thing right now, ok? I don't want to think about the Lab, or my...power, or what it means for my future,"

"Anya, I know you aren't exactly happy with me at the moment, but I don't think going out is the best option for you," Patricia sighed. "Your powers are uncontrollable, and now that you're older who knows what havoc you might cause? What if you hurt someone? What if you hurt Billy?"

"Don't you dare start with that shit! You are the one who kept all of this from me, so don't start using it against me and making me feel bad!" Anya swiped her purse from the side.

"Anya! I may have made a mistake, but I am still your mother!" Her Mom exclaimed shakily, tears in her eyes. "And as your mother, I

forbid you to leave this house!"

Anya laughed derisively, not sure where her words were coming from. "You forbid me? How exactly are you going to stop me, Mom?"

"Anya-"

"I've lived my entire life doing what was expected of me. Working, going to school, barely having any time for friends or a social life, and now you want to *forbid* me from leaving the house? No. I won't do as you say, I can do whatever the hell I want and no one can stop me, not anymore," Anya took a moment to realise that Patricia was staring at her fearfully. She looked down to see her hands on fire, the flames licking and tickling the skin of her wrists, inciting her to *just let everything burn*.

Bracken whimpered, her tail between her legs as she stared up at Anya with wide brown eyes. Anya immediately extinguished the flames, turning quickly from her Mom and leaving the house.

She hoped Billy was ready to go, as she flew down the porch steps, eyes training over the Hargrove house. To her relief, the front door slammed open to reveal none other than Billy himself. His flaming red shirt with his tight blue jeans set off all kinds of emotions within her body, and the anticipation of the night ahead made the flames swirl with excitement.

But something was off. Billy stormed onto his porch and down his own steps angrily, his jaw set tightly, fists curled and shoulders stiff.

"Billy?" Anya voiced warily.

His baby blue eyes found hers in surprise, as if he'd completely forgotten why the hell she was even there. Billy seemed to get even angrier as he regarded her, swinging his keys in his hand. "Sorry doll, date's cancelled,"

"What? Why? What's going on?"

"It's none of your fucking business, Princess. Go back into your castle and stay there," Billy growled, flinging open his car door and throwing himself inside. By the time Anya had even processed his

words, the car came to life with its usual roar and he was tearing down the street.

"Well that's just dandy!" Anya yelled out in the direction of his vanished vehicle, tempted to run after him and set it on fire. "Just fan-fucking-tastic!" letting out a yell of frustration, Anya sank down on the wooden step, head in her hands as she thought about how fucked up her life was.

It wasn't too long though, when her thoughts turned to Billy. He'd looked angry, but also...there was a pain in his eyes she'd seen before – when his father had gotten angry with him. Anya wasn't stupid, she knew Billy's Dad Neil was abusive and often hit his son, so maybe that's why Billy was so wound up?

"I have to find him." She voiced to herself, jumping up and climbing into her truck. Anya closed her eyes, concentrating, using her power to reach out to the one person who could help her locate Billy. Her feet met the cold, dark water of the 'dream circle', the realm between worlds, and called out El's name. For a long while, Anya believed the young girl could not hear her, but then, finally, El answered.

"Anya, are you ok?" She asked worriedly, appearing before Anya in a blur of hazy smoke. She looked completely different to the young, innocent girl Anya had left behind – brown hair slicked back with gel onto her head, her outfit swapped from overalls to a black leather jacket and baggy dark jeans. She even had black eyeliner smudged around her eyes.

"Yeah, what's wrong? Where are you?" Anya asked, her gut telling her El wasn't in Chicago anymore.

"I'm coming back to Hawkins, I saw Mike and Hopper, they are in some kind of trouble,"

"Upside down kind of trouble?"

"Yes,"

"Right. Well I guess Billy can wait then. Where are you headed?" Anya could feel the pressure building in her temples and she wanted

out of the dark place as quickly as possible.

"The Byers. Meet me there," El confirmed, before she dissolved in front of Anya's eyes like salts in a bath. Anya felt herself planted back in the seat of her truck. Blinking a few times to re-adjust to her surroundings, she revved up the engine and skidded into the road.

...

She had been driving for over ten minutes, and was nearly at her destination, when she felt it. Anya could feel their presence, those creatures with mouths that opened in four parts, their teeth sharp needle like points able to rip apart flesh as easily as a knife through butter.

The Byers house sat surrounded by the dense forest, made even denser by the darkness of the night. Loud, echoing shrieks and roars could be heard for miles, getting louder, closer. Anya realised the danger she was in too late, letting out a shriek of her own when something collided with the side of her truck.

Slamming on the brakes, she panted for breath, scanning the area for any sign of the monster. For a few moments, everything fell eerily silent...

SLAM.

Anya cried out as the creature slammed its body into her windshield, the glass splintering outwards like a spider's web. It hadn't penetrated her vehicle yet, though she knew it was only a matter of time. Without giving it much thought, she wrenched open the door and flew out into the night. The Byers wasn't far, she could see the light shining from inside and the front driveway, maybe she could make a run for it.

But why?

Anya suddenly stopped, for there was a strong voice in her head telling her no. She didn't need to run, or even be afraid. The demodog (as she knew the kids called these things), had jumped down from her truck, its long claws scraping into the ground. Anya lit up her

hands with flames as it sprang towards her. She juttred out her arms quickly, sending a line of fire straight at the creature to which it jumped back with loud, pained filled roars.

Its flesh started to burn and melt, body convulsing in agony. Anya could smell the stench of it burning, her eyes watering from its strength as she fought not to gag. Another demodog sprinted from the trees, its mouth open wide as if it wished to devour her whole. Anya jumped to the right quickly, avoiding its snapping jaws, managing to shoot fire into its side before it lunged for her again.

Without warning, the creature was thrown by an invisible force into a neighbouring tree. Its back crunched and bent unnaturally against the trunk, killing it instantly. Anya rolled over the ground and pushed herself to her feet, turning in time to see El emerge from the forest.

The two girls gave each other nods of acknowledgement, their greeting shortened as two more demodogs appeared from the blackness. El used her powers to lift one into the air like a puppet, twisting her hand so the creatures' neck was snapped before it even had time to fight her. She sent it flying through the air where it crashed straight through the front window of the Byers, its body disappearing into the house.

Anya, meanwhile, launched another round of fire at the demodog nearest to her. She felt blood dripping from her nose, yet did not stop until the creature was nothing but charred, indiscriminate flesh and bone. Her breath caught in her throat as she let the flames die, ignoring the immediate feeling of exhaustion threatening every muscle of her body. There would be a time to be tired, but now was definitely not it.

Following behind El, she watched as the girl unlocked the front door with her mind, allowing it to swing open. The occupants inside were deathly quiet.

With mouths hanging open, Anya wearily scanned the stunned group of unlikely people.

Hopper and Nancy immediately lowered their shotguns. Steve let the

nailed bat go limp in his grasp, whilst Lucas slowly released the tension of his sling shot. Mike all but dropped the gold trophy he had chosen as his weapon to the floor, as his eyes fixed on El and only, El.

Joyce and Johnathan Byers stood at the back with Dustin and Max, though this didn't last for long as they all processed who was standing in the doorway.

"El?" Mike gasped, tears flooding his eyes.

"Anya?" Steve voiced simultaneously, before he strode forwards. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping," She replied, as El and Mike embraced. "El told me you guys were in trouble,"

"El? How do you know...? Well, erm, you know, this is all just...we thought we were being attacked by er...dogs..." Steve started to lie, to which Anya rolled her eyes to the heavens.

"Save it Steve. I know everything, I know about the upside down, El, the labs, demodogs, all of it." She said, realising everyone had stopped talking to listen to their conversation. The inside of the Byers' house was covered in what looked like children's drawings, snaking around the walls and floors. The creature El had dealt with lay dead on the floor, tangled up in the now destroyed coffee table, its deadly teeth looking far more prominent in the light.

"Well, you know what we always say! The more the merrier," Dustin, with his thick brown curly hair and shining braces, gave her a suggestive wink and a grin. Lucas elbowed him sharply, whilst Max rolled her brown eyes.

"Anya can use fire," El said. "She was in the labs, when I was,"

"You what?" Chief Hopper exclaimed in shock.

"Look, we can discuss all that later, right?" Anya said.

"Yes. I want to know why you kept El hidden from me," Mike piped up angrily at Hopper, the tall man seemingly finding all the new information too much.

"Let's you and me talk, huh?" He finally said to Mike, leading the young boy away into an adjacent room. Their yelling could be heard through the walls, Mike screaming at Hopper for being a liar. Anya could relate.

"You shouldn't be here Anya, do you know how dangerous this all is?" Steve said as he scratched his head with his hand.

"Oh, I think I have every right to be here, Steve, considering all of you have been lying to me for the past year." Anya hissed at both him, Nancy and Johnathan. All three of them had the decency to look abashed. "You all knew why my Dad was murdered!"

"Anya I'm sorry, honestly, we wanted to tell you but it was safer for everyone not to," Nancy stressed in earnest, her eyes widened with worry and regret.

"Not good enough." Anya seethed darkly, feeling the beginnings of rage travelling through her stomach. A hand fell down onto her shoulder and she caught the dark, worried brown eyes of Mrs Byers, who smiled at her softly.

"I know you are angry, Anya. But Will is suffering and we need to help him,"

Anya took a deep breath. The older woman was right, they were all there to help Will. Her personal problems could wait, right now they had bigger fish to fry. The party all moved into the kitchen and gathered around the table, Joyce sat staring at a few child's drawings, the others waiting around for someone to speak.

"I can do it. I can close the portal," El finally said, giving a nod of affirmation at her own words. Anya remembered seeing the portal, when El had shown her the events of the year before. It led to the upside down, the dark, dangerous world that housed those awful creatures.

Hopper sighed, leaning heavily on the kitchen counter. "It's not like it was before, it's grown, a lot. And I mean, that's considering we can get in to the labs in the first place, the place is crawling with those dogs,"

"Demodogs," Dustin corrected.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, uh, demodogs. Like demogorgon, and dogs. You put them together and it sounds pretty badass -"

"How is this important right now?" Jim demanded in agitation.

"It's not, I'm sorry," The young boy responded, hiding his face beneath his red baseball cap to avoid Hopper's glare.

"I can do it," El's young face was set into a grim expression of determination, her hazel eyes steel coated with sheer will.

"You're not hearing me," Hopper pointed out.

"I'm hearing you," The young girl argued back. "I can do it,"

"Even if El can, there's still another problem!" Mike cut in. The boy had a paler than pale complexion, with thick black curly hair and dark eyes. He appeared genuinely frightened by the monumental danger of their task, yet also managed to hold a belief in their ability to do it. "If the brain dies, the body dies. If we're really right about this, I mean, if El closes the gate and kills the mind-flayers army..."

"Will's a part of that army," Lucas murmured.

"Closing the gate will kill him." Mike finalised.

"Then we better find a way to get that thing outta him," Anya, who for the longest time had remained silent, made eye contact with Mrs Byers. Joyce gave a soft gasp, stricken by the realisation before she jumped up from her chair and disappeared into Will's bedroom.

Hopper stood up straight, his face heavy with a frown. "It's gonna be a long night."

22. Chapter 22

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty Two -

"How the hell did I get stuck babysitting with you Harrington?" Anya asked in a drawl, arms folded and backside leant against the kitchen table. The boy in question gave a sharp sigh as he eyed her in exasperation.

"Well it wouldn't be my first choice either, but I guess it is what it is," Steve finally said. "Nancy needed to go with Jonathan so..."

Anya raised an eyebrow. "You two having trouble?"

"Not anymore. We're over. She's in love with Johnathan. I guess I was in denial about it, thought we could still make it work,"

"Wow, I didn't realise. Sorry Steve," She let her hand fall onto his shoulder for a moment, giving it a squeeze with a sympathetic smile. Steve took a moment to furrow his brow, eyes widened in alarm.

"Jesus, Anya, you're on fire," He stuck his palm on her forehead. "Are you sick?"

"No, it's my usual temperature these days," She batted his hand away. "I'm fine. Well...kind of,"

"What did El mean when she said you can use fire?" Steve pressed urgently. "That you were in the labs?"

"It's a long story Steve,"

"Then give me the short version,"

"Well..."

"Steve! Help me out here!" Dustin suddenly yelled from the front room. Steve let out another long sigh, as if the weight of the world sat on his shoulders.

"What do you want?" He said in annoyance, as he and Anya followed the noise of the four kids. The house was now far emptier than it was before, as the group had split into three parties. El and Hopper were on their way to the labs, where she could hopefully close 'the gate'. The Byers and Nancy, on the other hand, sort shelter at Hopper's cabin in order to get the alien 'mind flayer' out of Mike before said portal was closed.

The atmosphere at the Byers household was tense. Mike hadn't stopped pacing since his teary goodbye to El (the two were evidently in love), and the rest of the group were anxious about sitting around doing next to nothing to help.

"Help me get this thing into the fridge," Dustin called as he crouched in a squat, pulling at the demodogs head.

"In the fridge?" Anya said as she wrinkled her nose.

Dustin yanked the lifeless alien body so it slid towards the kitchen, a line of black oozing liquid leaving a trail on the wooden floor. "Yes, the fridge. Steve, a little help maybe?"

"Urgh." Steve swiped a blanket from the couch, wrapping it around the dead creature and hoisting it up. "Let's go then,"

"Is that really necessary?" Anya watched in dismay as Dustin started throwing food out of Joyce's refrigerator.

"Yes, it is," Dustin exclaimed passionately. "This is a ground breaking scientific discovery! We can't just bury it like some common mammal, ok? It's not a dog!"

"All right! All right, all right. But you're explaining this to Mrs. Byers, you got it?" Steve merely agreed with the distressed teen, proceeding to shove the dead body into the small square space. It took a bit of pushing and shoving, with a few curses on Steve's end, for the pair to finally fit it into the fridge.

"You do know the temperature of the fridge isn't sufficiently cold enough to preserve it, right? You'd have to put it in the freezer." Anya suggested once both guys had stopped panting for breath. Steve all

out glowered at her whilst Dustin gave himself a face palm.

"Duh. Steve-"

"No."

"But-"

"No." Steve finalised, just as they heard Mike begin to yell at Lucas and Max.

His voice was shrill and Anya may have found him slightly melodramatic if their situation wasn't as serious. "You didn't see it in the labs Lucas! The place was swarming with hundreds of those dogs!"

"Demodogs!" Dustin corrected, earning a glare from pretty much everyone.

"The Chief will take care of her," Lucas cried, using a broom to sweep up the broken glass on the floor. Max was crouched at his feet with a dustpan, her flaming red hair streaming to her waist as she collected the shards.

"Like she needs protection," The girl murmured.

"Well what can we do then? There's gotta be a way to help out El," Anya inquired, eyes training towards Mike. He nodded enthusiastically just as Steve stepped forwards.

"No! Anya, don't encourage them. Look, dude, a coach calls a play in a game, bottom line, you execute it, all right?"

"Ok, first of all, this isn't some stupid sports game," Mike retorted. "And second, we're not even in the game, we're on the bench,"

Anya was inclined to agree. "Right,"

"Anya! Right yeah, ok, so my point is...we're on the bench and there's nothing we can do." Steve finished his garbled sentence as he wiped alien goo from his hand with a tea towel. Anya gave him an incredulous gaze, wondering if he really had a clue what he was

talking about.

"That's not entirely true. I mean, these demodogs have a hive mind. When they ran away from the bus, they were called away." Dustin pointed out.

Lucas nodded at his friend's words, his eyes lighting up. "So, if we get their attention..."

"Maybe we can draw them away from the lab, and get them away from the gate," Mike finished.

"Yeah, and then we all die!" Steve raised his voice dramatically, though the kids completely ignored him.

"How would we do that?" Anya was genuinely interested.

"I got it!" Mike scrambled away into the kitchen and everyone followed instantly. He fell to his knees as he pointed at one of the drawings. They were all drawn on A4 pieces of paper, linked together like the pieces of an elaborate puzzle. Combined, it created a blue tunnel that circled the rooms of the house, mimicking a labyrinth. "This is where the Chief dug his hole. This is our way into the tunnel, so..." Mike ran back into the front room again. "Here, right here. This is like a hub, so you got all the tunnels feeding in here," He gestured down at the drawing of a large blue circle, the one tying everything together. "Maybe if we set this on fire..."

"Er, that's a no," Steve interjected.

"The mind flayer would call away his army. They'd all come to stop us," Lucas was practically bouncing on his heels as he spoke.

"Yeah, this is actually a really good idea guys," Anya agreed. "We could get the hell out of there before the 'demodogs' even knew it,"

"Exactly. It'll give El the chance she needs," Mike bobbed his head. Steve had been protesting through the entirety of their conversation, his voice getting louder due to the lack of coherence he was receiving.

"Hey! Hey Hey!" He roared, clapping his hands together loudly. "This

is not happening!"

Mike appeared stricken. "But-"

"No no no! No buts. I promised I'd keep you shitheads safe, and that's exactly what I plan on doing. We're staying here on the bench, and we're waiting for the starting team to do their job, does everybody understand?"

Anya was beginning to get impatient with him, and even more so at his lack of gusto. "Steve, are you serious? We can't just here 'on the bench' when we can do something to help-"

"Anya! I don't want to hear it, alright? This isn't some game, this is serious real life and death shit and I don't think you realise-"

"You don't think I realise? You don't think I know just how dangerous this is!? Who do you think killed those demodogs outside? It wasn't just El, it was me too! I'm not a little Princess you need to protect, all right? So shut the hell up and help us!" Anya practically seethed at him, feeling a fuel of rage at the very pit of her stomach. She ignored Dustin's hoot of approval.

Steve opened his mouth to argue when the sound of a car engine cut into the night. Anya felt her stomach drop to her knees as Max sprinted to the window. "It's my brother! Shit! He can't know I'm here! He'll kill me! He'll kill all of us!"

"Billy?" Anya murmured quietly as the headlights of the blue muscle car flashed through the curtains. Her brain began ticking over time, trying to conjure up the words she could say to him, that would convince him not to go into an angry rage. "All of you stay low," She finally uttered to Steve and the kids.

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve caught her upper arm.

"Going to talk to Billy,"

"Anya -"

"Look, Steve, just believe me when I say that I am the best person to go talk to him right now,"

"I really don't think you are," Steve said this rather pointedly, taking her by surprise. Anya had only told Gemma about she and Billy's 'relationship', and was damn sure she could trust her best friend not to tell a soul. Maybe they hadn't been as discrete as she thought?

"I don't really know what you mean,"

"Anya, cut the crap. One, just assume I know everything, ok? And two, I'm not letting you go out there alone with him – he's unstable. I don't trust him," Steve's gaze bored into her own. When had he grown up? Anya could remember a time when Steve was the asshole of the school, the one who would behave similarly to Billy. Now he was willing to protect a bunch of kids against not only threats from other dimensions, but from a furious Billy Hargrove.

"Fine, but I think it's a bad call." Anya said resolutely, not wishing to inform Steve that she was probably more qualified to protect them, than he was. She stood back from the door and gestured towards the handle. "Go one then,"

Steve merely shook his head slightly, his eyes regarding her in a strange way, almost as if he was noticing her for the very first time. Blinking, he took a deep breath of preparation, before swinging the old wooden door open and shutting it firmly behind him.

Anya pressed her ear against it.

"...dreaming or is that you Harrington?" Billy's unmistakably deep voice sounded, the slam of his car door following.

"Yeah it's me, don't cream your pants," Steve deadpanned.

"What are you doing here, amigo?"

"I could ask you the same thing, amigo."

"Looking for my little stepsister. A little birdie told me she was here," Billy's words were slightly muffled and Anya figured he had a cigarette in his mouth. His words explained why he'd cancelled their date, though she couldn't understand why he hadn't just told her that in the first place.

"Huh, that's weird, I don't know her," Steve lied.

"Small, redhead. Bit of a bitch?"

"No, sorry. Doesn't ring a bell,"

Anya cringed mentally. *Lie better Steve!*

"You know, this whole situation Harrington, is giving me the *heebie-jeebies*."

They were in the shit now. She heard shuffling from inside the house and turned to see the kids perched on the couch, peering rather obviously out of the window. "Guys! Guys get the fuck down you idiots!" Anya hissed lowly but loud enough for them to acknowledge her. They dipped down instantly.

"- and I find her with you, in strangers house, and you lie to me about it," Billy sounded livid.

"Man, were you dropped on the head as child or something? I don't know what you don't understand about what I just said, she's not here."

"Then who the hell was that just now?" Billy asked, right before Anya heard a swift kick and a thud. Steve let out a groan and she could only assume he'd been knocked to the floor. She scrambled back from the door upon hearing heavy footsteps, heart in her mouth as it was thrown wide open.

Billy loomed in the doorway. He clapped his eyes on her and he did a double take. "Anya? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Billy listen -"

His icy blue gaze curved around her towards the kids. "Well well well. Lucas Sinclair, what a surprise,"

"Billy, just wait and let me explain -" Anya said as she stood between him and his target.

"Get out of the way." He growled at her, eyes balzing with

uncontrollable rage.

"No, not until you listen!"

"I already listened to your pal Steve outside. Sleeping with him now, are you? Once a slut, always a slut, right Anya?" Billy hissed with venom, stepping closer until he was nearly nose to nose with her. "Now get out of my way,"

"So, you can what? Threaten a kid?" Anya wasn't going to let his words affect her. She gazed into his eyes that were normally the colour of the sea, light like the shallows with darker shades of the deepest waters. Now, however, his eyes blazed like the hot blue of fire, a heat she knew all too well. "Just please think about what you're doing!"

"I said get out of the way!" Billy grabbed hold of her forearm roughly. Anya panicked, her skin prickling with a heat she couldn't control as her instincts reacted to protect her.

Billy dropped his grip with a loud cry, proceeding to shake his hand out as he stared at her in alarm. "Shit! You fucking burnt me!"

Anya stared at him in mortification. "Billy I-"

"You really should have listened to her," said Steve, accumulating besides Billy as if he were an apparition. The swinging of his fist followed by a loud smack of fist meeting cheek had Billy reeling backwards into the kitchen.

"*Steve! Stop it!*" Anya fumed as Billy starting laughing, his nose bloodied.

"Looks like you got some fire in you after all huh? I've been waiting to meet this King Steve everybody has told me *so much about*," He started squaring up to Harrington once more. Anya slipped between the two boys lithely, her gaze on Billy.

"That's enough!" She said to him, though he didn't spare her a glance.

"Get out Hargrove," Steve warned. Billy took no time in dodging around Anya, swinging his fist harshly towards the slightly taller boy.

Steve ducked, managing to avoid the blow as the kids started hollering loudly (Dustin's voice being the forefront).

Anya yanked Dustin out of the way before he could be crushed by Billy's weight against the china cabinet, as Steve managed to clock Billy again. The boys tussled further, Billy crashing into the kitchen sink. He took less than a second to grab a plate from the draining board and smash it over Steve's head.

Now completely dazed, Steve staggered backwards to the front room. Billy easily strode towards him, gripping his coat collar. "No one tells me what to do," he proceeded to headbutt Steve, who fell to ground on his back. Billy appeared to be thoroughly enjoying knocking seven bells out of him, the animalistic, manic gleam in his eyes something Anya hadn't anticipated.

The shock rendered her useless for a moment. Billy began punching Steve repeatedly in the face, despite the fact he was already unconscious and Billy had clearly won the fight. Blood splattered over Will's drawings, as Steve's face got pummeled like a kid attacking a ball of playdough.

Had Anya been blind, this whole time? What had she been thinking, getting involved with the likes of Billy Hargrove? He had no respect, he was angry, he was a womaniser. He used and abused and did what he liked without any fear of the consequences. How could she have been so stupid? So naïve?

"Stop it!" Anya screamed, as Billy's fists made mulch out of Steve's face. "Billy! STOP IT! STOP! You're going to KILL HIM!" He wasn't listening. He wouldn't listen!

Anya let out a roar, the anger consuming every fibre of her being. Flames flared out of her hands and up her arms, the heat singing at her face as the fire whispered in satisfaction around her brain. Billy glanced up at her and gave a bark of surprise, nearly falling backwards in shock.

"I said stop." Anya said lowly, as the whispers told her to burn him. Burn him, burn him...

Out of nowhere, Max plunged a needle straight into Billy's neck. The young girl stepped back, away from her brother, who fingered his neck to pull the sharp syringe from his skin. "What the hell is this?" he asked blearily, eyes already going out of focus.

Anya's flames died down to nothing with a wisp of smoke, watching as Billy tried to get to his feet and failing miserably. He lay down on the ground heavily, laughing, the drug beginning to addle his brain. Max had effectively saved her brother from being burnt alive, because Anya honestly believed she may have done it out of pure, unadulterated rage.

And that scared the shit out of her.

"From here on out, you leave me and my friends alone. Do you understand?" Maxine's voice pulled Anya from her stupor, all three boys staring at the scene with mouths wide open. The girl was holding a baseball bat decorated with nails sticking out of the end, like something out of a trashy slasher movie.

"Screw you." Billy garbled, head swaying slackly over the ground.

Max brought the bat down between his legs, narrowly missing the goods. "SAY YOU UNDERSTAND! SAY IT! SAY IT!"

"I understand..." Billy managed, before his eyes closed shut and he drifted into unconsciousness. Max let the bat fall to the ground, striding towards her brother and pulling out his keys from his jean pockets.

"Let's get out of here," She said, jangling said keys in her hand. Anya stared at both Billy and Steve's bodies. Steve looked almost unrecognizable with how swollen his face was, and Anya was sure he would be heavily concussed. She knew Billy would be fine, once whatever drug had been in that syringe had worn off.

"Let me get some ice packs for Steve, and then we take him with us. Also you're going to have to help me get Billy into my truck," Anya voiced, feeling a little faint from using her power. She would offer to drive them to the tunnels, but her truck was slow and Billy's car would get them there a hell of a lot faster.

"Ok. I'll get some gasoline," Lucas said, earning an incredulous look from every person in the room. Anya patted him on the shoulder.

"Trust me, we won't be needing gasoline."

23. Chapter 23

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty Three

Anya never liked how fast Billy drove his car around the small, dark lanes of Hawkins. However, on this particularly needful occasion, she had her foot firmly on the accelerator as she travelled at deathly speeds into the night.

Billy's car was fantastic. Not only in appearance but in sheer power, the engine purring like a kitten. She took a corner hard and fast, earning a few gasps from the kids. Dustin was grinning like the Cheshire cat and she could see his beam in her peripheral vision. "Just to let you know, I think I'm in love with you," He'd been allocated to read out the directions, considering he'd called shot-gun the moment they decided to commandeer Billy's car.

"Dustin, as flattered as I am, can you please focus on the directions?" Anya said to him firmly, eyeing the map in his hands. Steve's sudden groaning alerted her to his imminent awakening and she cringed – he was NOT going to be happy.

"Oh, yeah sorry! Ok so you're gonna keep straight now for half a mile, then make a left on Mount Sinai," Dustin instructed.

"Thanks," Anya glanced back at Steve, his eyes opening as he gazed around in utter confusion. He was squirming from his position in the back seat, obviously in a lot of pain. "Hey Steve, it's alright,"

"Anya? What is going on? Where are we?" He asked in a panic.

"Just chill Steve. Billy beat your ass, but you put up a really good fight," Dustin cooed as Anya put the pedal to the metal.

"Ok, stop the car! I said we weren't going! Anya, seriously! STOP THE CAR!" Steve continued to yell as the kids shouted and argued amongst themselves. The chaos was beginning to give her a headache.

"Shut up! I need to focus!" Anya roared, though her words fell on deaf ears. "Dustin where the hell am I going!?"

"That's it! That's mount Sinai! Make a left! MAKE A LEFT!" Dustin screeched like a banshee. The whole car erupted into shrieks, Anya swinging the car to the left violently. "Ok now it's this field, this one coming up. THIS FIELD ANYA THIS FIELD!"

Another round of screams sounded. Anya skidded into the farmers field, clipping the fence slightly, then hitting the breaks just before they plummeting into a huge hole in the ground.

"Uh helllllooooo!" Steve cried out as he was thrown forwards. He took two breaths. "How have you passed your fucking test, Anya?!"

"Forget that now, let's go," She replied to him, wincing at the state of his face but also slightly amused at the colourful band aids Max had stuck to the cuts on his forehead. Anya leapt out of the car with the Dustin, Mike, Max and Lucas, who had popped the hood to grab their supplies. She was handed a scarf and a pair of red swimming goggles. "Are these necessary?"

"Believe me, where we're going you don't want to risk inhaling something toxic," Lucas said, voice muffled beneath the scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth.

"No! Oh no no no, no!" Steve protested after he practically fell out of the car, using the open door to prop himself up. "Where do you guys think you're going? Wha – hellooo? Are you deaf!? There is not a chance in hell we are going down that hole, I made myself clear!" He stepped forwards ill advisably, his knees giving way beneath him at a rapid pace. Anya quickly gripped his shoulders, using her body to keep him standing and peering up at him.

"Steve, will you just chill? You probably have a concussion," She said sternly. "Maybe you should stay here?"

"Hell no!" Steve argued, face a mere inch from hers. "I am not just gonna sit around up here and wait for you, we have no idea what else is down there,"

"Alright, ok. Tell you what, if there is any sign we are in serious danger, we'll head straight back up? How's that sound?" Anya compromised, staring up at his dark brown eyes and wondering why she'd never noticed how pretty they were.

"Erm, you guys? We kind of, sort of, need to GET MOVING!" Dustin suddenly yelled, his decibel causing Anya and Steve to jump towards the sky. "Steve, I know you're upset, but the bottom line is – a party member requires assistance, and it is our duty to provide that assistance. Now I know you promised Nance that you would keep us safe, so keep us safe." He threw Steve's backpack towards them both, Anya stepping back as Steve caught it in his hands, his nailed bat sticking out of the top.

Steve flashed Anya a short glance. "Fine. Fine fine. Just let the record state that I thought it was a bad idea,"

"Believe me, everyone in Hawkins already knows," Anya muttered, Dustin snorting in amusement whilst Steve merely glowered.

Anya followed the group as they hurried over the ruined pumpkins, the night air cold and still. She mimicked Steve by wrapping her scarf around her nose, her goggles slightly tight and making it hard to see properly. She'd have to manage, as God only knew what fresh hell she was about to descend into.

Mike eagerly slid down the rope they lowered into the hole, disappearing into the darkness, followed by Lucas, Dustin and Max. Steve followed behind, leaving Anya on the surface by herself. Casting her eyes around the darkness, she tensed when she caught sight of a figure standing within the trees...watching her.

A cold rush of dread filled Anya's entire body. Every sound around her seemed to be muffled, as if someone had their hands over her ears. The figure in the darkness merely gazed at her, shoulders wide set, stature tall, yet their face shrouded in the blackness of the night.

"Anya! Anya help me! Please, don't leave me alone in the dark! Help me!" The figure was screaming and she knew it was coming from the stranger, yet the voice echoed in every corner of the field. Her heart raced. She recognised that voice, she was so sure of it...

"...ya! Anya! *Come on* will you!?" Steve's bellow from inside the hole effectively slapped her back into reality.

"*Alright* I'm coming," She replied. The figure disappeared, along with the distressed male voice. What on earth was that?

Having no time to ponder on the subject any longer, Anya gripped the rope and shimmied down into the tunnel quickly.

Steve gripped her waist and lowered her down, her feet hitting the ground softly. She murmured a thank you, stepping away from his close proximity to observe the strange phenomena around them. The dark air was full of snow-white pollen, swirling about her like a bluster of feathers. The atmosphere felt bleak and eerie, yet lucent and vivid, all at once.

On taking a step forward, Anya's whole body felt almost weightless. "So...this is the -"

"Upside down. Yeah," Steve finished, expression hidden behind goggles and a scarf.

"I'm pretty sure it's this way!" Mike informed them all with shout, holding his torch up to the crudely drawn map in his gloved hand.

"You're pretty sure, or you're certain?" Dustin called to him.

"I'm 100% sure, just follow me and you'll know!"

"Can you guys lower your voices?!" Anya hissed, not wanting to run into any more demodogs than they had to.

"Anya's right, shut the hell up! Also, I don't think so! Any of you little shits die down here and I'm getting the blame," Steve announced as he strolled over to Mike, voice nearly as loud as the boys had been. "From here on out, I'm leading the way. Come on, let's go!"

Anya caught up to Steve, praying silently. Every corner they turned caused a sickly feeling in her stomach, every shadow that flitted in the dark morphing into the shape of a demodog.

Despite Steve insisting on being the leader, Mike overtook him a few

times to ensure they ended up going the right way. The pair bickered like an old married couple until Dustin began shrieking behind them.

Anya ran over to him quickly, dropping to her knees as he lay sprawled out on the floor. "Dustin what is it?!"

"It's in my mouth! It got in my mouth! Shit!" The boy was hysterical, pulling the cloth away from his mouth and coughing profusely. "Shit shit shit!"

"Oh, fuck it, what happened!?" Steve groaned. Anya felt a similar panic at the thought he may have inhaled something dangerous. She grabbed his face between her hands, eyes searching for any physical damage to his skin, whilst Dustin managed to calm himself down. He blinked heavily at her for a moment, before his face lit up in a relieved smile.

"It's ok! I'm alright guys,"

Anya sank back in exasperation as the others cursed at him. Dustin looked for all the world like he had no idea why they were all so mad, and Anya had to fight the urge to giggle. In all honesty, the kid was a riot, and sometimes in stressful situations it was easier to laugh than it was to succumb to tears.

"Come on Dustin," She mused, helping the boy up to follow the disgruntled pack.

"Thanks, at least someone cares about my wellbeing," Dustin grumbled, not bothering to re-adjust the scarf over his mouth. "So, tell me Anya, are you into younger guys?"

"Dustin, leave it out, would yah?" Steve barked. "We're here, guys. We found the hub,"

Anya peered into the large cavern like space, deciding it may be best to ignore Dustin's question altogether. She couldn't see very well and huffed in annoyance, pulling off her goggles and the mask covering her face.

The hub was a large cavern. It reminded her of the caves she and her Dad would explore on their hikes in the country. The walls were

covered, like the tunnels, in a thick gelatinous black substance. It seemed to breathe as if it were alive, as if it could slide about the place and take her in its slimy grip. In the centre was a large grey mound with membrane type veins stretching over its surface.

Perhaps it was alive. All one being, interconnecting in ways she could only dream of? Like Anya, El and Kali. Joined by one consciousness, linked together like the synapsis of the human brain.

Striding forwards, Anya tilted her head as she looked back at the group. "You may want to stand back."

They did. Anya closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts. The fire prickled and needed at her flesh, alighting in her palms and blazing towards her elbows rapidly. The flames wanted to spread but she fought them, containing the element to her arms, opening her eyes as she shot her hands forwards.

A scorching blast of fire hit the centre of the hub, illuminated the grey and black with blues and oranges. She directed the flames in further directions, determined to destroy as much as she could.

The whole cavern was suddenly screaming – high pitched, otherworldly wails that made her ears ache. The creature's pain was her delight and Anya revelled in it. Tentacles that resemble those of an octopus, only much larger, began writhing up into the air in agony, reaching high above the flames to seek relief from the heat.

"Anya! You've done it, let's go!" Steve called out behind her loudly.

"Just...a bit more," Anya said, her voice layered, like there was more than one person within her voice box. The fire licked and beckoned, told her to keep going, just keep going...

An arm wrapped around her waist and she was pulled back from the wall of fire.

"Anya come on, it's enough!" Steve spoke in her ear, his voice utterly bewildered with a tint of panic. She felt blood oozing from her nostril and the overwhelming feeling of exhaustion wracked throughout her body. The flames died on her palms as she slumped backwards into

Steve, who caught her in his arms immediately.

"Hey, hey you alright?" Steve asked worriedly.

"Steve come on man, we gotta go!" Mike roared amongst the other terrified cries of the kids. Anya clutched onto Steve's shoulders to haul herself into a standing position, a nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I'm good, let's go," She lied, not protesting when Steve took her hand and tugged her into the tunnels. They ran fast, the journey back seeming to take much longer than it had to get there. Steve was cursing under his breath, as Mike dictated their directions.

Something took hold of Anya's ankle. Her hand ripped out of Steve's as she was thrown onto her front and dragged backwards. She shrieked, clawing at the ground to find any sort of leverage. Dustin practically hurtled himself into the air, grabbing her arms tightly to stop her from being taken further in.

Anya screamed, as the skin of her leg erupted into sharp flames. The vine released her with an angry wail. She scrambled to her feet clumsily, noticing Steve managing to beat the living daylights out of a vine gripping Mike's leg with his bat.

Proceeding to run once more, they rounded a corner and Dustin practically skidded to a halt. The momentum sent him crashing to the floor, just in front of a single demodog. Its body pulsed with its low growls, heckles raised and claws scraping into the ground.

Dustin, for some reason, had stepped between the group and the creature. She frowned, wondering what he could be trying to do. "Dustin, move, I will take care of it,"

"No....no. This is Dart," Dustin replied. "Hey Dart, buddy,"

Oh. So, this was Dart, the creature she'd heard the boys talking about so many months ago, when life had been simple. Dustin continued to talk slowly and soothingly to the demodog, placing nougat down for it to eat, signalling the five others to move past the distracted creature quickly.

Anya became surprised to feel Steve slip his hand into hers again, the tall boy not even glancing at her they dashed away from the deadly demodog. She didn't have much time to ponder the meaning of his actions, though, as the tunnel suddenly lurched like an earthquake. Anya hurtled into the wall with Steve and they both gave an 'oof' sound, as the kids all scrambled to find their feet. Distance sounds of roaring and screeching sent chills rushing down her spine, her fear outweighing the tiredness she felt. "Come on we need to go! They are coming for us!"

The rope appeared into Anya's vision as they high tailed it through the last bits of tunnel. She paused, helping Steve get Max, Lucas and Mike up the rope first. Everyone was yelling and the sounds of the demodogs had gotten so loud they were deafening. Dustin's legs dangled and squirmed as he shoved himself up through the hole with a few choice words spilling out of his mouth.

"Right Anya, you next," Steve instructed, just as a demodog came crashing into view.

"SHIT!" Anya cried, lighting up her palm with immense effort, her body aching all over from exhaustion. "You go first, I'll hold them off a minute!"

"Fuck that!" Steve argued, brandishing his bat. "Like hell I'm leaving you down here!"

"I can handle myself Steve!"

"Anya - shit!" Realising it was too late, the pair both turned towards the creatures in a fighting stance. Anya raised her flaming hand in preparation, already wondering if this was to be her last moments on earth.

Surprisingly...she wasn't afraid. What was there to be afraid of, anyway? If she died, her Dad would be there to greet her. Anya was certain of that. If there as an upside down, who was to tell her there wasn't an afterlife?

She had discovered the truth of his murder, found out who she really was, and it was only now that Anya realised she had the closure she

needed. So, dying wouldn't be the worst thing, no, it wouldn't be at all.

Anya braced herself, only to find the fiercely fast creatures were simply running past both she and Steve. He watched them with wide eyes, the demodogs momentum almost taking them both down the tunnel. He quickly gripped her around the waist, the pair standing solidly together for a while until the last of the creatures had disappeared.

Their speed and determination meant only one thing; they were going back to the gate.

"Ok..." Steve breathed. "Let's get out of here now,"

"With you on that one," Anya agreed, only too happy to return to the surface once more. They all stood in anticipation, watching as the headlights on Billy's car illuminated brightly, feeling a shift in the air.

El had done it. She'd closed the gate...

It was finally over.

24. Chapter 24

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty Four - Redemption

How had life continued since that night?

Anya wasn't sure. In fact, if it wasn't for the sun rising and setting, the calendar on the fridge being ticked off day by day courtesy of her Mom, Anya would swear time was standing still.

The first day after the upside down and general saving of Hawkins (probably even the world), Anya slept for 16 hours straight. She awoke, having missed the entire day of school, to an empty house and a note from Patricia, saying she was working at the diner.

Her Mom seemed distant. She wasn't unkind to Anya, and for the past week had been prone to random bouts of small talk. They hadn't discussed that night, nor Anya's powers. Patricia was scared, Anya knew this. She could see it in the subtle glances her mother would warrant, the not so hidden fear in her eyes or the worst one – the despairing look of utter sadness.

Patricia thought Anya made a massive mistake, discovering her powers. Anya battled with this notion constantly, wondering the very same thing. Her dreams were full of fire, flames surging and hot and wanting to be released, wishing to be free from her. Did they have a life of their own? Had she truly opened Pandora's box?

She ignored the phone calls from Gemma, Steve and even once or twice, Billy. All three had even knocked on the door asking for her, but she'd insisted her Mom say she was ill, or out. Anya couldn't face any of them, couldn't face the reality that was bound to catch up with her in one way or another.

Her bedroom was becoming her safe haven, a place to hide from the world and its harsh stare. Unfortunately, seven days of barricading herself away and she had become stir crazy. The walls felt as if they were going to start pushing in and crush her, like the scene from

Stars Wars, so she rolled out of bed from her blanket burrito with an idea.

"Oh, hi honey," Patricia said in surprise, as Anya padded down the stairs in a pair of denim jeans and a jumper. "Going out?"

"Yeah...going to take Bracken for a walk," She responded, pulling on her coat and scarf.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Her Mom suggested sincerely.

"I'm good...just need to go and clear my head, you know?"

"Sure. Just try to get back before it gets dark, then,"

Anya nodded, as Bracken started dancing around the hallway once she spotted the lead in her owner's hand. She marched past Billy's house quickly, hoping he wasn't in and hadn't spotted her, taking Bracken into the forest.

The earth was hard and biting cold, frozen from the lowest temperatures they'd had in Indiana in decades. Anya noticed the change in the air the moment El closed the gate. It was like a weight had been lifted, like the sky was back in its rightful place, rather than hanging low and heavy over the small town.

According to Dustin and the others, any demodogs that were out of the upside down when El shut the gate would be dead, considering the young girl had cut them off from their source. It still didn't stop Anya from jumping occasionally at a shadow in the tress, or the rustling of an animal in the undergrowth.

She kept walking, further and further in. Anya realised she needn't have bothered with her coat; she couldn't feel the cold in the slightest. Finally stopping to take a breath, she pulled off both her scarf and coat, setting them on the ground. Bracken milled around, tail wagging happily, as Anya let her palms flare.

The fire danced just above her skin. The flame was blue where it was the closest to her flesh, then faded into orange and yellow. She wondered if her entire body could be amerced in the flames, though she hadn't bought out any spare clothes – the leg of her green

jumpsuit from her escapade through the tunnels had been burnt to a crisp. If this was the case, would her hair burn? Or because it was part of her, was it flame proof?

There were just too many questions and not enough answers.

She let the flames die, leaning back against a large tree trunk with a heavy sigh. She looked upwards, watching the tree tops dancing in the light breeze, trying to ignore the craving to *burn something*.

Footsteps pulled her out of that particular thought. Anya started, standing up straight, catching sight of none other than Billy Hargrove striding towards her. He had on a black sherpa style coat that was zipped right up to his chin, hands dug deep into the pockets as his heavy boots hit the ground. Bracken raced over to him immediately, her tail wagging furiously as he pulled a hand out of his coat to pat her on the head.

"*Traitor*." Anya muttered under her breath, crossing her arms as she caught Billy's blue gaze. He didn't look angry, nor did he have his usual sexy smirk plastered on his face. The swelling on his nose was still a little prominent, but wasn't too bad, and a cut that was now scabbing crossed over his right eyebrow. She noted the cuts and bruises on his knuckles, unsurprising, considering what he'd done to Steve.

"Hey..." Billy said, uncharacteristically awkward. "I er...saw you, walking past the house and I just -"

"Decided to stalk me?" Anya finished.

"No. I wanted to talk to you," He stepped closer, a cigarette tucked behind his ear. "Thought you'd died or something, not going to school, or work. It ain't like the Anya I know,"

"I've been...ill. And quite honestly, not wanting to speak to you." She could see a flashback in her mind, of the anger in his eyes, the way he'd kept punching Steve over and over again. The images sent shivers of dread through her spine.

Billy's nostrils flared a little as he regarded her. "Yeah, well I want to

Speak to you. I want to know what the hell you were doing at the Byers last week,"

"You don't get to ask me any questions, Billy. I don't owe you anything and I don't need to explain myself to you," Anya bit back, affronted at his audacity. "What the hell were you thinking? You could have *killed* Steve, you do know that right? If Max hadn't stopped you-"

"Max shouldn't have even been there, and I want to know why you were,"

"It's...it's complicated, ok?" Anya had no explanation for him. She couldn't tell him about any of it – the truth was dangerous enough for those who knew, and Anya wasn't about to drag people into the mess unnecessarily. "It still doesn't excuse what you did, Billy. What happened? Why were you so angry?"

Billy closed his eyes for a moment. "I told you, Max went missing."

"No, it's more than that. It was...your Dad, wasn't it?" She probed, watching as his fists clenched tightly for a second. Despite his anger, regardless of the violence, Anya couldn't find it in her heart to be afraid of him – or despise him. "Please, tell me Billy,"

"What is there to tell, Anya? You live next door, surely you've heard the yelling?" Billy saw her eyebrow raise and he sighed. "Max ran off, and when my Dad and Susan got back, he was mad. He gave me shit about it and I got pissed off,"

"No, all right. There's pissed off, and then there's full blown rage. When I wouldn't get out of the way, what were you going to do?" Anya asked him, her voice a little thick with emotion. "Because the look you had in your eyes really convinced me you were going to hurt me."

There it was. Guilt. The emotion rushing over his handsome face like the breaking of a dam. "You know I would never hurt you,"

"Do I?" She implored. "Does Max know that? This anger you have needs to stop, Billy, before it consumes you,"

Billy blinked back the tears forming in his eyes. "Do you think I like it? Being so angry, all of the time? I can't control it, not since we moved here...and it's gotten worse,"

"What's gotten worse?"

"He has. My Dad. He said this was supposed to change everything, a 'fresh start', he said, a 'clean slate'. But it's just the same. He fucking hates me and he always has." His tough, muscled exterior before her was crumbling, revealing the scared, damaged boy beneath.

"How can he hate you? He's your dad?" Anya asked this somewhat naively. Even with the issues she and her Mom were having, Anya's parents had always loved her unconditionally.

"Because...I'm the reason my Mom is dead." Billy's words struck her in the heart like a shard of ice. A tear escaped his eye, voice rough as he continued. "I loved surfing as a kid, you know? And one day...one day we were on the beach, just me and her. The West Coast where I grew up...best place in the world...the waves were so high that day and I was only about 8 years old, so I came off my board pretty easily. I got to the shore and I was so upset. All I wanted was my board back, so Mom...she went out for it. I sat on the beach and waited for her to come back. I waited so long... *but she never came.*

They found her body miles up the beach three weeks later. She'd been taken by an undercurrent and drowned, right there in front of me...and I did nothin'. Fucking, nothing. I caused the death of the only thing my Dad ever really loved and he's never forgiven me for it."

"Billy..." Anya whispered, reaching out to him.

"Don't. I know what you're going to say. 'It isn't my fault', well fuck that, and fuck your pity," He rasped as he dodged her hand, his attempt at being aggressive falling short.

"I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say that your Dad is an asshole for making you believe that. What happened to your Mom was an accident," Anya said. "You were just a kid!"

It was no wonder Billy had anger issues. Not only had his Dad messed him up, but he also lived with the guilt of his Mother's death. Anya couldn't contemplate having such trauma thrown at someone so young, having to face that kind of animosity every single day. She approached Billy once more, cupping his face gently and using the pad of her thumb to wipe away a tear. "It's ok, for someone to pity you every once and a while, Billy. It doesn't mean you're weak, it means you're human."

"I just want it to stop, you know. I'm tired of feeling this way," Billy murmured sadly, the hot feeling of his breath on her face as they were so close.

"I know. And I don't pretend to get it. But I do know what it's like to lose a parent." Anya's eyes watered, her heart breaking for him. "And, well, if you ever feel really angry again, just come and find me. We can go out and punch things – *things*, not *people*,"

Billy had by now rested one of his large hands on her waist, fingers curled into the ends of her long hair. His face contorted into one of pain, as more tears streamed from his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry..."

Anya looped her arm around his neck, pulling him towards her. Billy buried his face into the crook of her neck, shoulders shaking as he wept silently, letting out years and years of anguish. She may have been hurting herself, may have been the one who also needed to break down – but not now. Right now, Billy needed her more than ever.

She continued to hold onto to him for a long while, hand rubbing up and down his back soothingly. Billy eventually cried himself out, his breathes becoming long and deep as he returned to normality once again. Clearing his throat, he pulled away from her to wipe his face with his hands, giving his shoulders a bit of a roll.

"It's going dark, we should get out of here before we end up getting lost," He said in a deep gruff, eyeing Bracken who had been amusing herself by chewing up a large stick.

"Sure thing," Anya agreed, scooping up her coat and scarf. Billy eyed

her in confusion, hand falling to the exposed skin of her neck.

"How are you not freezing? You're always super hot,"

"Well duh. I'm hot." She teased, trying to change the subject.

"Come to think of it...that night, at the Byer's house, your...your hands set on fire..." Billy gripped her hands, as if he were thinking it may happen again if he touched her. Anya began to panic, her brain working overtime for an excuse.

"I...er...Max! Max drugged you Billy, remember? I mean do you honestly think I could set my hands on fire? That's crazy talk - it was the drug, for sure. It messed with your head," She stared him straight in the eyes, determined he would believe her words. "You were pretty out of it,"

"Why do I get the feeling you're keeping something from me?" Billy asked in a low voice, appearing almost hurt that she would not open up to him, as he had to her. For a brief moment Anya considered telling him everything, from the upside down to her powers. The temptation wore off, however, when she contemplated not only the danger it would put him in, but also his reaction.

Running her thumbs over his battered knuckles, Anya beseeched him with her eyes. "Please...Billy, just trust me?"

"All right," He sighed. "I guess you being on fire is kind of batshit crazy anyway,"

"Just a little." Anya replied, weighed down immensely by her guilt. Billy looked exhausted but it didn't deter him from pulling her into his body, their lips meeting in an intense kiss. It was passionate and wild, full of unresolved emotion, the type to make Anya's toes curl and skin ripple with pleasure. They forgot, for a brief moment in time, about any woes or struggles.

The real world could be left behind, even if more trouble awaited them – just around the corner.

...

25. Chapter 25

Hey guys! This is it, the last chapter! I can't believe it's come to an end so swiftly. I've truly enjoyed writing this fiction and fleshing out Billy's infamous character a little bit more. I'm glad I waited for season 3 to air, as it gave us all a bit of an insight into Billy's home-life before Hawkins. It was always an idea of mine to create a slightly different backstory for his Mom, to give his Dad's anger more depth and to explain why Billy is so aggressive and angry all of the time.

My original character Anya is a favourite of mine to write. I couldn't just simply create a female character to fall in love with Billy – I wanted her to have her own backstory and go through her own adventure too. I believe her to be a really strong female character – I hope this came through in my work!

So, this chapter has a little bit of Anya/Billy fluff. Their romance so far has been pretty intense, so it's time they got a bit of happiness.

I do currently have plenty of ideas for a sequel, though I can't promise when this will manifest into a story. I decided to go back to university this year, so I am currently finishing my degree after a three-year gap. It's all going to be writing my dissertation and getting assignments done from here on out, so wish me luck!

I would like to thank everyone who voted and commented on Stranger Love – you guys always inspire me to keep writing. I sincerely hope everyone enjoyed reading this. As El would say – you are all 'bitchin'.

Jess xxxxx

...

Stranger Love

Chapter Twenty Five – Time to Say Goodbye

One Month Later

"Billy stop it." Anya mumbled, her voice thick with sleep. She was

cocooned in his blankets and had no intention of moving for a long while. Billy, it seemed, was getting bored, for he had started poking at her nose like the big child that he was.

"It's nearly 10am, Anya, are you gonna wake up today or what?" He asked, words laced with amusement.

"No." She responded, opening one eye to glare at him. "Leave me alone, you jerk,"

"Hm, that's not what you were saying last night, or the night before that..."

Anya rolled her eyes at his smirk. She sighed, stretching out her limbs before sitting up to spy the mess that was his bedroom. Her clothes littered the floor, along with copious vinyl's they'd peeled through the night before. "Alright. I'm awake,"

"I didn't say you had to leave my bed," Billy chastised playfully, blue eyes watching her as she slid from the sheets. She was wearing one of his black Metallica T-shirts, one she doubted he was going to get back anytime soon.

"I need the bathroom now," Anya chimed, pacing through the empty hall. Susan, Neil and Maxine had been away in the city for three days. They were on a shopping spree to get a dress for Max, who had the middle school Snow Ball that very evening - though the redhead had been pretty disgruntled by the idea of it. Billy had accosted Anya the minute they left the driveway and she hadn't been out much since (apart from a shift at the diner), the pair completely wrapped up in each other in a rare moment of total peace.

Billy still got angry. Neil was still an ass, and Susan still very much a wet blanket, but life was rolling on. Things were, for the most part, getting better. Billy had taken up boxing at the local gym, which seemed to help curb his angry outbursts and meant he was only pounding leather, rather than someone's face. He was trying, Anya could see it and was grateful. Maxine seemed far easier around her older step-brother, and they even laughed and joked sometimes when he dropped her off to the arcade. He still got a bit annoyed with Lucas, and all the other boys Max hung around with, saying she

should have friends *'who were girls'*. Anya merely told him to stop worrying, they were good kids, after all.

Anya often visited El at the cabin. Her powers were growing, so the girls trekked far into the woods to practise at least once a week. Hopper was with them, most days, keeping their endeavours from prying eyes, and when he couldn't, Steve did. He had been the rock that Anya needed, someone she could talk to besides El openly and honestly about her powers. She loved Gemma, but her best friend, like Billy, was better off not knowing anything about it.

After a quick freshen up, she heard the sound of crashing coming from downstairs, followed by Billy cursing under his breath. Curiosity peaked, Anya followed the noise and padded into the kitchen. The boy in question was standing at the stove, handling a frying pan and making more sound than technically one man should be able to make.

"Billy, what are you doing?" She said with a smile.

"I was going to make pancakes," He replied simply, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

"Do you even know how to make them?" Anya sidled up next to him, bare feet slapping on the tiled floor.

"Not a fucking clue, but it can't be that difficult can it?" Billy retorted. "You wanna help or just stand there being useless?"

Anya moved behind him, wrapping her arms around his bare torso and planting soft kisses between his shoulder blades. "I think I'll just stand here, being useless," She whispered, not missing the way his muscles twitched beneath her fingertips. Billy wasn't the most tactile of beings (unless sex was involved), but he was become easier with it. Anya felt there was a wordless understanding between them – one of trust, that had developed since he revealed his darkest fears to her. He needn't say anything, his eyes held enough emotion to tell her that he didn't mind her touch, or that she always wanted at least one cuddle after they had sex (he'd made a point of telling her, though, that she was lucky he didn't kick her out of bed once they were finished, as was his normal protocol when it came to women). Anya

had said 'bite me' in response, and the conversation part of that evening ended abruptly, with Billy in fact biting her a couple of times.

"You are treading a fine line, Princess," He warned teasingly, head lolling back a little as she peppered her lips to the back of his neck. His golden skin was soft and smooth, yet hard and toned all at the same time. She liked how it felt against her paler flesh, standing on her tiptoes to gently bite at his earlobe.

Billy span around so quickly Anya gave a small squeak of surprise, laughing as he hoisted her up by the hips so her legs wrapped around his waist. "I thought you were making me pancakes!" She protested between giggles, as he nuzzled into her neck, the cigarette falling to the kitchen floor. She was deposited onto the kitchen table, Billy still between her thighs as he descended his lips onto hers almost desperately.

"The pancakes can wait," He murmured through a sexy grin, running his large palms along the plush skin of her legs. Anya trembled beneath his touch, as she always did, fingers curling through his hair.

"We shouldn't do this here, Billy, I am serious!" Anya said between kisses, pushing at his chest a little playfully.

"Alright then," Billy smirked with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Don't you dare – Ahh!" Anya cried out as he hoisted her up onto his shoulder. "*Billy!*"

He merely chuckled, carrying her squirming form back up to his bedroom and letting the door shut over with a snap.

...

Eleven, or Jane Hopper, as was printed officially on the adoption certificate, sat patiently still as Anya fussed around with her hair. She brushed and gelled some of the curls back, sweeping the shorter bits at the front into a fringe. The younger girl was already wearing her grey prom dress, the sleeves puffy and small waist synched in with a brown belt.

Anya could tell she was nervous, her hands were clenched together tightly, brow furrowed a little. "It's going to be alright El. You need to relax! Tonight is meant to be fun,"

"I just...have never been to a school dance. What if I make an idiot of myself?" El said as Anya slid a blue clasp into the side of her hair.

"You won't, plus Mike will be there and the guy is coo-coo bananas over you, he'll make sure you're ok,"

"Coo-coo bananas?" El asked with a grin.

"Yeah, it means he liliikes you," Anya sang, ignoring Hopper's pointed clearing of his throat from the front room. He was currently sat in front of the TV, waiting for the girls to hurry up, so he could take El to the dance.

The younger girl blushed, saying in a quieter voice. "I really like him too,"

"He's a good one. And anyway, you single-handedly saved Hawkins from an evil upside-down dimension. I'm pretty sure there is nothing you can't do," Anya grabbed a lip-gloss from the side, smoothing the light pink colour onto El's lips. Her eye makeup was a subtle blend of pastel pink with purple lining her lower waterline, and just a hint of blush on the apple of her cheeks. "There. Do you want to see?"

"Yes," El nodded eagerly, jumping from the stool to check her appearance in the full-length mirror. "Wow, I look...like a girl,"

"You look amazing, if I do say so myself," Anya grinned, leading her into the sitting room. "What do you think Chief?"

He sat up straight, a fondness and spark in his eyes that had been missing for quite a while. "You scrub up well kid,"

"Scrub up?" El asked in confusion.

"He means you look great," Anya informed her, before turning to Hopper. "Well, she's all ready. Are you sure I can't take El to the dance? I don't mind,"

"Thanks for the offer Anya, but I wanna do it, keep her safe an all," He said, patting El on the shoulder. Adopting her seemed to have changed him for the better, and the two had a very strong bond. Apart from keeping El hidden away until things blew over, life for the young girl was becoming relatively normal (if that were even possible for both of them).

"Have fun tonight," Anya said to El before she got into Hopper's car, enveloping her into a hug. El squeezed onto Ana tightly for a moment.

"Thank you,"

"Go on then, let's not keep him waiting any longer," Anya smiled, regarding Hopper who merely rolled his eyes good naturedly from his spot behind the wheel. El giggled softly, joining her father in the passenger seat.

Anya watched as his car disappeared into the night. She sat on the porch a while longer, smoking a cigarette as she watched the stars twinkle in the inky black sky. Things were, for now, in a tranquil state of equilibrium, one that deep down, she knew in her heart was not going to last.

...

"You get anywhere with your research, then?" Steve asked through a mouthful of his huge burger, the thing nearly the size of his head. Anya gave a nonchalant shrug. Her father's diner was quiet, the evening drawing in fast and dark. She'd been working seven hours straight, trying to take her mind off things, but it was proving quite the task to do so.

"I was in the library for three hours yesturday. I found the term 'pyrokenisis' but it was in an old comic book – not exactly a definitive source," Anya drawled, unimpressed with her findings.

"Yah, like the erm, human torch?" Steve responded.

"You could say that, I guess," Anya sighed as she pushed around her fries with her fork. There was literally nothing she could find to help

her. Her powers were not something exactly seen every day, and like El, Anya was beginning to feel trapped. She didn't know where to ask for guidance and she was worried her fire may get out of control. "My Mom said the doctors in the labs were worried that my power was growing too strong...and now it's been lying dormant...what if I like, spontaneously combust, or something?"

"You won't. I mean, I've watched you and El when you're practising and you seem to have pretty good control over it," His words held a confidence in her that made Anya's heart swell.

"Thanks...I guess I just, don't want to hurt anybody, you know?"

"Look, I can't even begin to image what it's like being you right now. But I do know that you're one of the bravest chicks I ever met in my life. First you lose your Dad, then you go through the hell of finding all this shit out about you're past and yet you've held yourself together like... I don't even know what. You don't give yourself enough credit, Anya,"

"I can feel it though, Steve. I can feel this...dark energy, inside me like...it wants something," Anya caught his concerned gaze. "You think I'm insane, don't you?"

"No, not insane. Maybe a little crazy..." He made a small space between his finger and thumb, ignoring her narrowed stare. "What exactly does this dark energy want?"

"That's what scares me the most. I have no idea,"

"What does El say about it?"

"She seems to have a better handle on things. I mean, our powers are mostly triggered by intense emotion. So... I guess I just have to keep my anger in check."

Steve snorted. "With Hargrove around, I'm not sure you'll manage,"

"Steve." Anya warned. "I know you don't like him, but he is trying,"

"Yeah, *trying* being the operative word," He deadpanned, flinching as Anya threw a fry at him. "Hey!"

"I don't want to talk about Billy right now," She said firmly, with a hint of amusement in her tone. "You always get tetchy,"

"I do not get 'tetchy'." He said, taking one of his own fries and flicking it at her.

"Don't throw fries in my diner, Harrington,"

"But you just-"

"My diner, my rules," She grinned sweetly, laughing at his expression. "Thanks, by the way,"

He flashed her a puzzled gaze. "For what?"

"Just being here," She said simply. "I don't think I could have coped those first few weeks without having you as a shoulder to cry on. Oh and, sorry about all that, by the way,"

"It's all right, Anya, you don't need to thank me or be sorry," He shrugged, sitting back against the booth after practically inhaling his food. "It's what I'm here for,"

"Yeah but, you were going through a break up and I basically just made it all about me."

"I think your problems are slightly bigger than mine and Nancy's relationship shit-fest," Steve gave her a crooked smile, though the pain in his brown eyes was prominent.

"Yeah but you loved her, it's not something you can just recover from,"

"I thought I loved her..." He sighed, fiddling with the straw in his coke. "After thinking about it though, I'm not so sure. It's like, I just went for her because we were both 'popular', and I wanted to be 'King Steve' with his Queen. It's seems so dumb now,"

"Well, we did all get a bit of perspective," Anya said.

"True. And, well, I suppose I recently realised that the feelings I had for Nancy just weren't what I thought they were, because I felt it

properly for someone else,"

"Really?" She sat up straighter. "Who is it? Someone at school? Do I know her?"

"Er, no no. You don't know her," Steve replied quickly, stumbling over his words.

"Well...who is it?"

"Like I said, you don't know her,"

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Anya raised her eyebrow at him in question, not missing the slight flush on his cheeks.

"No. Anyway, she's taken so I don't have a chance there," He mumbled.

"Well, whoever she is must be really dumb to be with someone else over you," Anya tucked a curl behind her ear, managing to eat a few fries that were now cold.

"Believe me, she's the total opposite of dumb..." Steve looked like he wanted to say more, when the juke box in the corner started playing 'Light my Fire' by The Doors. Anya let out a groan, sliding as far down in her seat as possible.

"Just kill me now."

Steve laughed at her reaction. "I think we just found your super hero theme song!"

...

The two girls walked through the cemetery in silence on a cold, crisp morning. Drops of dew clung to long, unkempt grass sprouting from older graves in dire need of maintenance. Some tombstones were leaning in random directions from years of standing in the ancient graveyard, whilst others were newer, a stark reminder that death in any timeline was inevitable.

Benny Hammond's grave stood amongst these newer slabs of stone;

his name etched forever in the icy marble. It seemed a stark contrast to how warm he had been in life, a shame to have his memory preserved in such a way. Anya felt the familiar pang of pain in her chest at viewing his final resting place, watching as El stepped forwards to place white lilies atop the grave.

She retreated back to stand with Anya, as they both gazed downwards. She placed her arm around the younger girl's shoulders.

"Hey Dad...this is El. I finally found her. I finally have all the answers for you."

...

END.

Stranger Love will continue.